

THE IMPROVISATIONAL TECHNIQUE OF ÉRIC SAMMUT

by

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Submitted to the faculty of the
Jacobs School of Music in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Music
Indiana University
December 2016

Accepted by the faculty of the
Indiana University Jacobs School of Music,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Music

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November 17, 2016

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Acknowledgements

This project has been in the making for nearly five years, and could not have been completed without the aid of many people. First and foremost I would like to thank my parents, Barbara and Scott, for their unending love and support throughout my pursuit of three music degrees, in three different states, over the last fourteen years—not to mention their enthusiasm for my musical education early on, beginning in 1994 when I first picked up a pair of sticks. I would like to thank two of my earliest and most influential teachers: Steve Hatfield, and Lisa Hittle. They taught me how to play, how to listen, and what it means to be a musician. Thanks to Kevin Bobo, who has been a constant inspiration to me as a teacher and mentor since we first crossed paths in 2001. I would not have fallen in love with the marimba without his influence, and it has been a special privilege to have him serving on my doctoral committee. I would also like to thank Dr. J. C. Combs, my first percussion professor at Wichita State University, who remains an enormous inspiration to me as a musician and artist. During my time at Wichita State University (2002–2007) and The University of North Texas (2007–2009), I had countless wonderful teachers and colleagues from whom I learned so much—too many to list for fear of leaving someone out. Thank you for many years of support, inspiration, and friendship.

Having the opportunity to pursue a doctorate at Indiana University was a dream come true. I would like to thank the Indiana University percussion faculty for years of excellent teaching and guidance, as well as their endless support of my growth as a musician, and the development (still very much in the works!) of my creative vision: John Tafoya, Steve Houghton, Michael Spiro, and Kevin Bobo. Thanks to Zach Compston for initially suggesting the idea for this project; to Erin Jeter for providing access to important P.A.S. resources; to Brian McNulty and Andy Smith for providing advice and insight into the process of completing this degree, as well as their inspiring musicianship and professionalism; to Frank Samarotto from whom I learned, through his theory courses at Indiana, a method of musical analysis that informs many of the musical examples in this document; to Alex Cofone and the folks at Marimba Productions, Inc. for granting permission to use the many musical examples

throughout this work; and of course, I owe a big thank you to my entire doctoral committee—Kevin Bobo, John Tafoya, Steve Houghton, and Brent Wallarab—for being enthusiastic about my topic, reviewing the document, and helping me complete this project, the final step of my formal education.

I would also like to thank Lalo Davila for providing me with the opportunity to work alongside him at Middle Tennessee State University, and for his energy, passion, and encouragement during the last two years as I have begun my professional career while simultaneously working to complete my degree. Thank you to Dr. Michael Parkinson and all of my colleagues here at MTSU for their enthusiasm and for welcoming me into the MTSU School of Music community—I am fortunate to be here. Thank you also to my students at MTSU, from whom I have learned so much and who have been patient with me as I have juggled the two sides of my life, particularly during this past semester.

And last but certainly not least, thank you to Éric Sammut, the subject of this project, for being so open, so generous, and so willing to share his knowledge and experience with me. Needless to say, he and his music have been an inspiration to me for many years, and the opportunity to work with him directly has been life changing. Please see the Preface for a detailed account of how we first crossed paths, and how this project ultimately came to fruition.

Preface

My first encounter with Éric Sammut was twenty years ago, at a Saturday afternoon clinic he presented during the fall of 1996 at Wichita State University in Wichita, KS. At this time I was in the seventh grade. I had only been playing percussion for two years and had not yet begun playing the marimba. Sammut was in the middle of a clinic and concert tour in the wake of his First Prize victory at the first-ever international marimba competition that had taken place during August of 1995 in Asbury Park, NJ. Although at such an early age I did not fully understand the significance of this encounter, I did appreciate, along with everyone else in the room, that we were all experiencing something special. One year later I began learning four-mallet technique and worked on my first solo: Mitchell Peters' *Yellow After the Rain*. Over the next several years, my musical development went in many directions, and by the time I encountered the published music of Éric Sammut during my senior year of high school, I had learned enough about jazz harmony to appreciate, and be drawn into, Sammut's sound world. At that time I had begun studying jazz piano and recognized the overlap between his music and the chord voicings, melodic tendencies, and overall 'vibe' of much of the jazz I had been listening to and practicing. This was the hook that drew me in and led to a long-term fascination with Sammut's work.

During the fall of 2005, I crossed paths with Sammut twice in quick succession, this time as a senior at Wichita State University where I was working on my Bachelor's degree in percussion under Dr. J. C. Combs. I was in attendance for Sammut's clinic presentation at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in Columbus, OH, entitled, "Four Steps to Feeling Comfortable at the Marimba," where he premiered the *Three Spirals*. Less than a week later Sammut was in residency at Wichita State, teaching lessons, presenting a clinic, and performing a concert. I took a lesson and soaked up as much information as I could. Being exposed to his ideas about playing the marimba, as well as witnessing his improvisational approach to the instrument, was an amazing experience. To my great surprise, he invited me to perform his piece, *Caméléon*, on his solo concert the following evening, which was an incredible honor, and established a connection between us that has lasted to this day. During his

concert he performed an as-of-then unpublished arrangement, *Variations on Porgy and Bess*. This piece stood out to me as particularly amazing.

In 2007, as a first-year masters student at The University of North Texas, I travelled to Paris, France to perform with the UNT Percussion Ensemble at the PerkuMania festival at Sammut's school, the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris. During our last evening in Paris before heading back to Texas, we ran into Éric Sammut in the hallway and during a brief conversation I asked him if there was a score available for *Porgy*. He said yes, but since this was our last night there was no time for me to get it from him then, so I would need to contact him later. After a series of emails, Sammut mailed me an autographed copy in an envelope, and I spent the better part of the summer of 2008 learning the work. It remains in my repertoire to this day and will always be a special piece to me.

I next encountered Éric Sammut as a first-year Doctoral student at Indiana University where, at the 2009 PASIC in Indianapolis, IN, he performed a solo showcase concert titled *Baby Come Bach*, juxtaposing works by Bach with largely improvised arrangements of popular and jazz pieces, along with some of his own compositions and a special improvisational version of Gordon Stout's *Second Mexican Dance*. Witnessing this performance was another life-changing experience for me as a musician, sending me on a path toward learning to improvise on the marimba and writing my own arrangements. When the time came to choose a subject for my Doctoral Final Project, I considered several options, but when a friend suggested the possibility of traveling to Paris to study with Sammut, the choice seemed obvious. From there the idea grew and after contacting Sammut to get his approval, it became reality.

My research resulted in two more opportunities to interact with Sammut. The first was a road trip to New Jersey during June of 2014 to attend the Mallet Masters Festival hosted by Leigh Howard Stevens, where I attended an evening concert of Sammut's, followed the next morning by an extended clinic and master class, and finally, a two-and-a-half hour interview where we were able to sit down and discuss a variety of topics. Then, during the first week of December of that same year, I travelled to Paris and spent a week working with him directly, taking three extended lessons, watching him teach, and even

having the opportunity to present and perform some of my own arrangements for him and his students. This was a very special and memorable week.

A large portion of my research for this project derives from these last two encounters, made possible through Éric Sammut's seemingly endless generosity with his time, energy, and knowledge. It is my sincere hope that this project will succeed in further sharing Sammut's art with the percussion world, and will, in a small way, pay tribute and say "thank you" to Éric Sammut himself, without whom none of this would have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Historical Context

Before examining Sammut's music in any detail, it will be beneficial to place both his music and career in a historical context. While a detailed account of the history of the marimba is outside the scope of this project, a concise outline of the major periods of development will establish Sammut's place in the lineage of the instrument's practitioners and repertoire. A major turning point in Sammut's solo marimba career was his first prize victory at the first Leigh Howard Stevens International Marimba Competition and Festival which took place August 8–12, 1995 in Asbury Park, NJ. The idea of holding an international solo marimba competition was fairly new. Although Leigh Howard Stevens had been scheduled to judge at similar events in France in 1989, and Warsaw in 1993, these events both ended up being cancelled. Stevens decided if it was going to happen, he was going to have to do it himself.¹ The feasibility of such an event depended, to a large degree, on the international status of the marimba as a viable solo concert instrument, and the availability of quality repertoire and established performance practices. By the last decade of the 20th century, these requirements had been met, through developments primarily in the United States and Japan, over the course of the preceding one hundred years.

Early 20th Century

It is primarily Sebastian Hurtado who, around 1894, is credited with adding cedar box resonators and a manual of accidentals to what had been a diatonic Guatemalan marimba.² It was this newly constructed chromatic marimba with which Sebastian's sons first toured the United States beginning in 1908, playing arrangements of traditional Guatemalan songs alongside European classics. J.C. Deagan, who had been manufacturing keyboard percussion instruments in America since the late 19th century, incorporated various features of the Guatemalan marimbas into his xylophone designs, seeking an increased range and deeper tone. By 1910 he was manufacturing a series of instruments called *Marimba-Xylophones*, which, when combined, covered the range of a symphony orchestra. By 1915 the larger

¹ Cohen, Albert H, "Marimbas get respect at Asbury Park festival," *Asbury Park Press*, August 2 1995.

² Rebecca Kite, *Keiko Abe: A Virtuoso's Life*, (Leesburg, VA: GP Percussion, 2007): 131.

instruments had disappeared from the catalogues, and by 1920 the lowest note on any keyboard instrument was the C an octave below middle C.³

In 1915 the Hurtado brothers returned to America to represent Guatemala at the Panama-Pacific Exposition (the World's Fair) in San Francisco as *The Hurtado Brothers Royal Marimba Band*. They performed daily for the length of the 9-month engagement and were "the sensation of the entire Exposition." They were recorded on-site by Columbia Records and received the Gold Medal of Honor at the close of the fair for their "outstanding contribution."⁴ After this accomplishment, they went on an extensive tour of the United States, recorded many records for the Victor Talking Machine Company, and brought much exposure to the instrument. All of the Hurtados eventually became U.S. citizens, and after much recording, performing, and touring, settled in California. In fact it was Celso Hurtado that performed the first solo marimba concert in Carnegie Hall in 1947, on an instrument of his own construction, accompanied by Narcisco Figueroa on piano. The program consisted of transcriptions of classical works by composers such as Paganini, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, Sarasate, Lecuona, Chopin, and Liszt.⁵

Clair Omar Musser

During the first half of the 20th century, Clair Omar Musser played a vital role in the development and dispersion of the marimba in the United States and abroad. Born in 1901, Musser began his xylophone studies in the fifth grade after hearing a phonograph recording of Thomas Mills with the United States Marine Band. Several years later he was "utterly floored" on witnessing Abraham Hildebrand (a.k.a. Teddy Brown) performing four-mallet arrangements with the Earl Fuller Big Band around 1918, on a four and a half octave Deagan Marimba-Xylophone.⁶ With Hildebrand's recommendation he travelled to Washington, D.C. to study with Philip Rosenweig, and subsequently

³ Ibid., 133.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rebecca Kite, "The Marimab in Carnegie Hall and Town Hall from 1935–62," *Percussive Notes* 43 no. 4 (August 2005): 51.

⁶ Clair Omar Musser, "Clair Omar Musser," *Percussive Notes* 37 no. 2 (April 1999): 7.

established himself as a virtuoso soloist, playing in theaters and appearing with symphony orchestras, performing transcriptions of violin concerti. He was hired by Deagan in 1930 to promote their products, and, through his Deagan connections, acquired a sponsorship to form a 100-piece marimba orchestra to perform at the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago. For this event Musser designed the new Century of Progress Marimba, trained the performers, transcribed and arranged the music, and conducted the performance. Two years later, in 1935, Musser organized the International Marimba Symphony Orchestra, another 100-piece marimba ensemble, with the purpose of touring Europe and performing for the 25th anniversary of the coronation of King George V. Special King George model marimbas were designed for this occasion, and although that specific performance was cancelled, the ensemble nonetheless had a successful European tour and returned to perform in Carnegie Hall later that year. The repertoire for these ensembles consisted of transcriptions of orchestral works.⁷

One key contribution of Musser's to the technique of marimba playing was his innovative method of holding four mallets. The traditional method of holding two mallets in one hand involves placing the outer mallet underneath the inner, between the index and middle fingers, so that the mallets cross in the palm. George Hamilton Green and his brother Joseph discuss this grip in a xylophone method book published in 1922.⁸ As a xylophone technique, this grip was transported to Japan in the early 20th century. Musser's idea was to hold the mallets independently of one another, which allowed for smoother interval changes and greater polyphonic possibilities. The true origin of this development is unclear. "According to Vida Chenoweth, Musser did not mention the source of his grip, although he talked about other players like Red Norvo who used the cross-hammer grip. She assumed that he arrived at the grip because he wanted a large interval spread."⁹

⁷ Rebecca Kite, *Keiko Abe: A Virtuosic Life*, (Leesburg, VA: GP Percussion, 2007): 169.

⁸ Green, Joe and George Hamilton Green, *Green Brothers Advanced Instructor for Xylophone*, (New York: Green Bros., 1922): 11.

⁹ Kathleen Kastner, "The Emergence and Evolution of a Generalized Marimba Technique," (DMA Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1989): 36.

The early Musser marimba orchestras had far-reaching effects. Not only did they succeed, on an international scale, at validating the marimba as a vehicle for serious music making, but additionally several members of Musser's marimba orchestras went on to successful careers as influential marimba soloists, and some of the earliest original marimba compositions were written expressly for Musser's 'graduates.' The first marimba concerto, Paul Creston's *Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra*, was written in 1939 for Ruth Stuber, who had been a member of the Century of Progress orchestra. Milhaud's *Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone* was written in 1947 for Jack Connor, who had been in Musser's International Marimba Symphony Orchestra. Two other IMSO members, Lawrence Lacour and his wife Mildred, brought the marimba to Japan for the first time in 1950 while doing missionary work.

Through the remainder of the 1930's and 1940's, Musser directed many other marimba orchestras, and continued his work at Deagan. Beginning in 1944, he taught music theory part-time at Northwestern University, and in 1946, became part-time instructor of marimba, which lasted until 1950.¹⁰ In 1948 he left Deagan and formed his own company, and so continued to manufacture marimbas under his own name. It was during this period that he composed his *Preludes* and *Etudes* for solo marimba that were to become standard marimba repertoire, and it was also during this time that he taught many students that were to carry the art of marimba performance into the next generation. Among these was a young Vida Chenoweth who was destined to be one of Musser's most influential students. Clair Omar Musser was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society (PAS) Hall of Fame in 1975, and passed away in 1998.

Vida Chenoweth

Vida Chenoweth was born in 1930 in Enid, OK, into a musical family, and began playing marimba as a young girl.¹¹ During the summer of 1948 as a high school student she relocated to Chicago and studied with Musser at Northwestern. As she recollected, "if you were serious about the marimba there was no alternative for you any place in the world. You went to Northwestern University to study

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹¹ Leigh Howard Stevens, "An Interview with Vida Chenoweth," *Percussive Notes* 15 no. 3 (June 1994): 22.

with Musser.”¹² That summer she won the National Marimba Contest and performed with one of Musser’s marimba orchestras, both of which were offshoots of the Chicagoland Music Festival.¹³ The following year she enrolled at Northwestern and became a formal student of Musser. Years later she recalled, “Musser’s greatest contribution to me as I look back, was that of inspiring and encouraging me so that I came to be confident.”¹⁴

After finishing her studies, she eventually moved to New York City, where she acquired management and began concertizing. She is credited as being the first concert solo marimbist, and the first marimbist to play truly polyphonic music through the use of mallet independence.¹⁵ She also sought to build a repertoire of original marimba works, and through her efforts many pieces were written for her. One of these was Robert Kurka’s *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra*, which was premiered in Carnegie Hall in 1959. This performance not only marked a new contribution to the slowly growing solo marimba repertoire, but also brought critical acclaim to the marimba as a serious solo instrument for the first time. It also launched her national and international performance career, as she toured the U.S. and Europe in the wake of her Carnegie success. In 1962, she broke ground yet again by recording the first solo marimba album, *Classic Marimbist*, on Epic records. The album featured works by Bach, as well as original marimba pieces, including Alfred Fissinger’s *Suite for Marimba*. The *Suite* was written in 1950 and is considered the first major composition for solo marimba. As Rebecca Kite observes, “Fissinger was perhaps the earliest composer to explore the unique sound of the marimba in a new way, not relying on typical xylophonistic writing.”¹⁶ Shortly after its release, her album was imported to Japan.

In 1963, Chenoweth suffered a severe hand injury, and although she fully recovered, the experience caused her to rethink her life’s priorities, and she redirected her efforts toward Christian

¹² Kastner, 34.

¹³ Kastner, 37.

¹⁴ Leigh Howard Stevens, “An Interview with Vida Chenoweth,” *Percussive Notes* 15 no. 3 (June 1994): 22.

¹⁵ James Strain, “1994 PAS Hall of Fame Inductees: Vida Chenoweth,” *Percussive Notes* 32 no. 6 (December 1994): 8.

¹⁶ Rebecca Kite, *Keiko Abe: A Virtuoso Life*, (Leesburg, VA: GP Percussion, 2007): 179.

missionary work, linguistics, and ethnomusicology. She continued performing on a limited basis and performed her final concert in 1981.¹⁷ Vida Chenoweth was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in 1994.

Keiko Abe

Keiko Abe was born in 1937 in Tokyo. She began her musical life at age six on the piano. When she was ten, she began playing xylophone in an after-school ensemble, and by the time she was thirteen she was taking xylophone lessons with Eiichi Asabuka, a xylophonist well known for his daily radio broadcasts with NHK Radio in Tokyo. A year later she won an audition and started performing radio broadcasts herself, becoming one of Japan's youngest professional performers. As a young girl Abe learned the 'traditional' method of holding four mallets, but even in the early years, experimented with holding up to six at a time. In 1950 she first heard the marimba when Lawrence Lacour's ensemble visited her school, and was fascinated by the sound, although she did not have access to a marimba until 1954. As a junior in high school, she studied piano, theory, improvisation, and analysis with Masako Sasaya, who played an instrumental role in helping her develop her unique voice. Then, in 1956, she enrolled at Tokyo Gakugei University where she received undergraduate and graduate degrees in music education, composing her first marimba solo, *Frogs*, in 1958.

Through the late 1950's and into the mid 1960's, Abe was active as a freelance performer and recording artist, appearing frequently with two chamber groups: the Xebec Trio, a marimba trio that featured arrangements of popular songs, and the Tokyo Marimba Group, whose first concert in 1962 featured newly commissioned works for chamber ensemble, as well as solo marimba. Among the premiered works was *Suite for Marimba: Conversation* by Akira Miyoshi. Their collaboration continued as he wrote *Torse III* for the second Tokyo Marimba Group concert, which took place in 1965. Both of these pieces have since become standard marimba repertoire. Although the Tokyo Marimba Group disbanded after this second concert, these performances marked the beginning of Keiko's foray into

¹⁷ Martin Weir, "Catching Up with Vida Chenoweth," *Percussive Notes* 32, no. 3 (June 1994): 54.

classical music and the active commissioning of new works, as opposed to the popular music she had been involved with up to this point in her career.

In 1967, Abe began planning for what would be the first concert consisting entirely of original works for either solo marimba, or marimba with chamber ensemble, performed by an individual soloist. After a year of planning, preparation, and collaboration with commissioned composers, the concert, titled “Keiko Abe—An Evening of Marimba: In Search of Original Works for Marimba” was held on October 4, 1968 in Tokyo. In an interview from 1991, Abe expressed the impact of this concert on the future of the marimba:

In 1968, I planned a concert of commissioned works. It was uncertain at that time whether or not the concert was going to be considered as a concert of classical music for the Arts Festival by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs since no one had ever performed a concert of newly commissioned works and, also, because the marimba was considered an instrument for popular music. Nevertheless, the marimba was finally recognized as an instrument for classical music as well as popular music. The concert had a strong impact on the field of music, changing ideas about, and appreciation for, the marimba.¹⁸

This concert featured world premiers of Akira Yuyama’s *Divertimento for Marimba and Alto Saxophone*, as well as Minoru Miki’s *Time for Marimba*. These pieces, like Miyoshi’s, were destined to become standard marimba repertoire. She followed this first highly successful concert with two others, “An Evening of Marimba II” in 1969 and “An Evening of Marimba III” in 1971.

Over the next two decades, Keiko Abe’s career took on an international scale. Her recordings became available in the U.S. beginning in the early 1970’s, and Japanese marimba literature was gradually incorporated into the teaching curriculum of influential percussion educators across the country. She performed a concert at the second-ever Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC), in 1977, where “[s]he showed us, through her incredible musicianship and performance and her choice of high-quality serious music, that art music of the highest caliber was now part of the percussion world.”¹⁹ She began collaborating with Yamaha on the design of a new marimba with improved intonation, a deeper tone, and a larger range than the 4-octave Musser marimba she had used earlier in her career. This

¹⁸ Keiko Abe, “The History and Future of the Marimba in Japan,” *Percussive Notes* 22 no. 2 (January 1984): 42.

¹⁹ Rebecca Kite, “The World of Keiko Abe,” *Percussive Notes* 39, no. 5 (October 2001): 68.

resulted in a 4.5 octave (low F) instrument that by the early 1980's included a roll-up extension, expanding the range to a full five octaves. In 1984, she introduced the first full 5-octave instrument, the YM-6000, to the world with the premier of Miki's *Marimba Spiritual*. Her Carnegie Hall premier occurred in 1981, once again bringing a new level of marimba artistry to the famous venue. She also expanded the expressionistic possibilities of marimba performance in the early 1990's, playing freely improvised duo concerts on a tour of Japan with jazz vibraphonist Dave Samuels. Some of these performances are captured on the live CD, *Improvisations on Nature*. Through years of international touring, composing, commissioning, recording, and teaching, she has had an enormous effect on the percussion world. Keiko Abe was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in 1993.

Gordon Stout

Born in Wichita, KS in 1952 into a musical family, Gordon Stout was exposed to classical music as a young child. By 1960 he was living in Michigan and began taking marimba lessons with James Salmon, a future PAS Hall of Fame inductee who had toured with one of Musser's marimba orchestras in 1936. Because Stout was so young when he began marimba, Salmon showed him a modified, cross-grip version of Musser's technique, with the intent of re-adjusting when Stout became older. However, Stout did so well with this unique method that they never made the switch to the 'proper' Musser grip. Stout still uses this technique today, referring to it as "Gordon's Grip."²⁰ During his senior year of high school, in 1969, Stout composed his first two marimba compositions, *Elegy* and *Reverie*, both inspired by and intended as study pieces for the slow chorale movements of Fissinger's *Suite for Marimba*.²¹ The following year he began his collegiate percussion studies under John Beck at the Eastman School of Music.

At Eastman, Stout studied percussion with John Beck, but also studied composition with Joseph Schwantner, Samuel Adler, and Warren Benson. He completed a book of marimba etudes in 1973 that

²⁰ David Scimonelli, "The Solo Works for Marimba of Gordon Stout: Compositional Evolution and the Challenges of Performance Practice," (DM Dissertation, Indiana University, 2012): 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

dealt with, among other technical issues, his “ideo-kinetic” concept that was eventually expanded into an entire book of exercises and published in the 1990’s.²² The following year he composed *Two Mexican Dances for Marimba*, which played a vital role in both expanding the marimba repertoire and pushing the technical possibilities of the instrument into new territory. Leigh Howard Stevens had the following to say regarding these important pieces:

*Everybody knows and plays, rightfully so, the famous ‘Mexican Dances.’ Those were seminal works that changed the future of the marimba because of their textures and ground-breaking techniques they introduced to four-mallet literature. The left hand in the ‘First Mexican Dance’—disjunct, leaping, Alberti-like bass—was unprecedented and a huge musical leap—pun intended!—for the marimba and its compositional possibilities. Likewise, the filigreed four-mallet patterns of the ‘Second Mexican Dance,’ forming intricate harmonies, had no historical or pedagogical roots in the previous marimba literature. They set the marimba off in a new direction.*²³

The *Mexican Dances* were performed by Stout at the first ever PASIC in 1976.

Following his performance at PASIC ‘76, Stout’s career took off. He presented master classes across the U.S., and began teaching, first at St. Mary’s College in Maryland, followed by a brief period (1979–1980) as the marimbist-in-residence at Wichita State University. In 1980 he started teaching at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York, where he still teaches to this day. He has been a highly influential teacher through the years, many of his students having gone on to successful careers as performers and educators. As a composer he has written over five-dozen pieces,²⁴ and he is still an active composer. Many of his pieces have become standard repertoire. He also has remained an active performer and adjudicator, with appearances across the globe. Gordon Stout was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in 2012.

²² Gordon Stout, *Ideo-kinetics: a workbook for marimba technique*, (Ithaca, NY: G & C Music, 2001).

²³ Lauren Vogel Weiss, "2012 Hall of Fame—Gordon Stout: Master Teacher and Marimba Master." *Percussive Notes* 50, no. 6 (November 2012): 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

Leigh Howard Stevens

Dubbed “The World’s Greatest Classical Marimbist” by Time Magazine,²⁵ Leigh Howard Stevens was responsible for a revolution in marimba technique in the mid 1970’s. Born in 1953, Stevens grew up in New Jersey and during high school, he planned on a career as a drum set player. His first exposure to mallet percussion was his junior year, when he had to learn a xylophone solo for all-state auditions. During this time he began experimenting with four-mallet technique using vibraphonist Gary Burton’s grip, which is a modified version of the traditional grip.²⁶ When he started college at Eastman in 1971, he discovered that his approach to four-mallet technique, including the execution of one-handed rolls and Baroque ornamentation, was considered unique and advanced. So, within the first years of his study, he had already pushed marimba technique into new territory. After not making a top jazz band at Eastman, he reconsidered his options and decided to pursue a career as a solo marimbist.

Stevens decided to seek out an experienced marimba teacher, and during the summer of 1972 he “sold [his] drumset to pay for an airplane ticket to New Zealand”²⁷ to study with Vida Chenoweth. She required him to play with the Musser grip, and so six months before departing, he spent time learning the method, but altered certain aspects of hand position and grip, and began formulating ideas about stroke motion. His primary technical innovations at this time included “the vertical hand position, (in contrast to flat-palmed Musser players), pivoting around either unused mallet, (instead of lifting the unused mallet out of the way), and moving the end of the inside mallet through the palm for larger intervals.”²⁸ During his summer with Chenoweth, he learned primarily how to practice, and how to memorize music. They also worked on specific details of pieces such as the Creston and Milhaud concerti and Musser etudes.

During his subsequent years at Eastman, Stevens continued developing his ideas about marimba technique, which lead to several further innovations. His method was more flexible and fluid than either

²⁵ “Leigh Howard Stevens,” <http://www.mostlymarimba.com/composers/composers-p-t/465.html?itemid=27> (accessed 9/14/16).

²⁶ Gary Burton, *Four Mallet Studies*, (Chicago: Creative Music, 1968).

²⁷ Lauren Vogel Weiss, “2006 Hall of Fame: Leigh Howard Stevens,” *Percussive Notes* 44 no. 4 (August 2006): 19.

²⁸ Lauren Vogel, “Interview with Leigh Howard Stevens,” *Percussive Notes* 21 no. 1 (October 1982): 67.

the cross grip or the Musser approaches, and so he developed his own mallets using longer birch shafts, as opposed to the shorter rattan shafts that had been common up to this time. The rigidity of the birch complemented the flexibility of his grip, which opened up many possibilities. During this time he worked on refining transcriptions of composers such as Bach, Schumann, and Debussy, music that he later recorded on his two solo marimba albums, *Bach on Marimba* and *Marimba When*. He also began commissioning new works for solo marimba that utilized the possibilities of his technique. The first of these composers, Raymond Helble, was a graduate student at Eastman during Stevens' sophomore year, and wrote the first of his *Preludes* for Stevens beginning in 1973. Over the course of his career, Stevens was involved in many commissioning projects, and has had many pieces written for him over the years from composers such as John Serry, Jacob Druckman, Roger Reynolds, David Maslanka, Joseph Schwantner, Gordon Stout, and many others.²⁹ He has also composed two pieces of his own, *Great Wall* and *Rhythmic Caprice*.

Stevens' performance career had its true beginning at his debut performance at the 1976 PASIC, the same year that colleague Gordon Stout premiered the *Mexican Dances*. Stevens played selections from Bach and works by Raymond Helble, demonstrating his new technical and musical achievements. Following this performance, he toured the country and appeared at PASIC's in 1978 and 1979, the latter marking his New York debut in Town Hall, and featuring the world premieres of two major works, Helble's *Toccata Fantasy* and Serry's *Night Rhapsody*.³⁰ Since then he has appeared in nearly every state in the U.S., and has performed all over the world.

Between 1974 and 1978 Stevens compiled his ideas on technique into a method book that was published in 1979 as *Method of Movement*, which has since found its way into the curriculum of most major universities. In 2006 Gordon Stout commented, "I would estimate that 80–90 percent of marimbists worldwide use the technique that Leigh created."³¹ He originally founded Marimba

²⁹ Lauren Vogel Weiss, "2006 Hall of Fame: Leigh Howard Stevens," *Percussive Notes* 44 no. 4 (August 2006): 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

Productions to publish this book, and the company, now known as Keyboard Percussion Publications, houses one of the most extensive marimba (and percussion) libraries in the world. In 1982, he founded Malletech to manufacture and market his new mallet designs, and quickly began making mallets for other prominent artists. During the 1980's, Stevens was involved with marimba design for Musser, but by the 90's he decided to manufacture marimbas on his own, and so Malletech began marketing marimbas in 1992.

In addition to his accomplishments in the areas of technique and performance practice, repertoire expansion, instrument and mallet design, and publishing, Stevens has also been active in pedagogy. Although he taught marimba at the Royal Academy of Music in London from 1997–2004, his biggest educational contribution is arguably the annual LHS Summer Marimba Seminar, which started in 1980 has grown into an event involving around 30 students per year from all over the world. By the 1990's, Stevens was in a perfect position and climate to host the first-ever international marimba competition, which, as mentioned above, took place during August of 1995. This event was followed by a second competition in 1998. Since the turn of the 21st century, he has remained an active performer, educator, author, and entrepreneur. Leigh Howard Stevens was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in 2006.

François Dupin

A leading figure in French percussion pedagogy, François Dupin was born in 1931 and at age sixteen, was a member of the first percussion class at the Conservatoire de Paris. Throughout his career he was known as a performer, an educator, as well as a composer, having studied composition under Darius Milhaud. He was a founding member of the Orchestre de Paris, serving as timpanist for 26 years beginning in 1967. Prior to the 1980's, Dupin taught at several conservatories in France, and was in demand as a clinician in France as well as Germany and Japan. In 1981 he established the first percussion class at the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Lyon, and around this time he obtained a grant and toured the United States to share perspectives and learn about American percussion pedagogy.³² To understand

³² Michael Rosen, "In Memoriam: François Dupin," *Percussive Notes* 33 no. 1 (February 1995): 56.

the significance of his international involvement with percussion education, one must consider the general attitude toward education in France during the middle of the 20th century, summarized by Frederic Macarez in 1998:

*The French are known to be individualistic people, which can have both drawbacks and advantages... The Conservatoires, which were created all over the country, were sometimes quite isolated from each other because of the lack of communication at that time. They became real "strongholds" for the teachers in residence, whose knowledge and reputations were held in awe. But these professors only dealt with their own students, ignoring other musicians, whom they knew nevertheless. The famous French individualism aggravated the situation. The teachers "formed" students who only responded to the teaching they had received and the personality of their master. In turn, these musicians applied the same methods of teaching to their own students. Thus "chapels" or "channels" have appeared in France over the last thirty years. Once inside, one remained closed in, either for lack of curiosity or for fear of being labeled as a "traitor."*³³

Dupin's openness was unique for his time, and he became one of the few French members of the Percussive Arts Society. In 1984, Dupin had the following to say regarding the resistance he encountered in his efforts to share with and learn from the international percussion community, as well as his introduction to what was becoming modern marimba technique:

*You know it is difficult for me in France even to be here. They think I am crazy, too conceited and too independent. I come to America to learn and to get information and, at the same time, to teach and to bring information about percussion in France. I also want to bring back information for my colleagues. That's so important. This is the reason we are not used to playing with four mallets. This is a technique I didn't know at all until I came to America.*³⁴

Thanks to Dupin, this resistance began to relax. As Macarez related, "the situation is finally starting to move in the right direction: French percussion is opening up inside and outside. The key figure was François Dupin."³⁵

Through his American contact he became close friends with Michael Rosen and Leigh Howard Stevens. Rosen had been one of the first American professors to incorporate the newly emerging Japanese literature and techniques into his curriculum in the early 1970's, presenting the American

³³ Frederic Macarez, "Percussion in France: A Turning Point," *Percussive Notes* 36 no. 4 (August 1998): 39.

³⁴ Gary Olmstead, "An Interview with François Dupin," *Percussive Notes* 22 no. 5 (July 1984): 37.

³⁵ Macarez, 40.

premiers of Miyoshi's *Torse III* and Maki Ishii's *Marimba-Stuck mit Zwei Schlagzeuger* in 1973.³⁶ Leigh Howard Stevens, whose *Method of Movement* had been recently published, made a great impression on Dupin. By 1984, Dupin had translated *Method of Movement* into French and began teaching it to his students. As he described it,

*The technique Leigh created is more than a new grip—it's a philosophy: the mallets are free in the hands, so the musicians who use this technique can discover a profound awareness of the sound through all the different movements. Most importantly, his teaching enables students to develop the most essential aspect required to become a good musician: listening.*³⁷

Through his openness and curiosity, Dupin left an indelible mark on the state of French percussion pedagogy, and was able to share French perspectives on percussion performance through his international tours, multiple appearances at PASIC, as well as contributing articles and interviews to PAS publications. He was responsible for bringing the technique of Leigh Howard Stevens into France. Among Dupin's students during the 1980's was Éric Sammut, who credits Dupin with teaching him the Stevens technique.³⁸ François Dupin passed away the year before the Stevens Competition, in July of 1994.

Éric Sammut and the LHS Competition

Éric Sammut was born in Toulouse, France in 1968. His musical training began on piano, but he started his percussion training shortly after that. As a teenager, Sammut first became interested in jazz after hearing the band *Weather Report*, and by his late teens he was taking jazz piano lessons at the Conservatoire National de Musique de Lyon, where he also studied percussion from 1985–1989 under François Dupin and Georges van Gucht. He spent two years gigging with a working jazz sextet and, through this experience, acquired “a small but good knowledge of jazz harmony.”³⁹ After receiving First Prize on graduating from the Lyon Conservatory in 1989, he was appointed principal percussionist with

³⁶ Rebecca Kite, *Keiko Abe: A Virtuoso's Life: Her Musical Career and the Evolution of the Concert Marimba*, (Leesburg, Va: GP Percussion, 2007): 85.

³⁷ Quoted in Lauren Vogel Weiss, “2006 Hall of Fame: Leigh Howard Stevens,” *Percussive Notes* 44 no. 4 (August 2006): 21.

³⁸ Brian Pfeiffer, “An Interview with Éric Sammut,” *Percussive Notes* 49 no. 3 (May 2011), 34.

³⁹ Ming-Jen Suen, “An Analysis and Comparison of Four Rotations Pour Marimba, a Solo Marimba Suite by Éric Sammut.” (DMA Dissertation, The University of North Texas, 2011): 7.

the Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Lyon. He received his Teacher's Certificate in 1995, and after winning the Stevens Competition that same year, toured the United States, Europe, and Japan, presenting concerts and master classes. He also began teaching marimba at the Conservatoire National de Région de Toulouse, as well as the Royal Academy of Music in London.⁴⁰ In 1998, he became the principal timpanist with the Orchestre de Paris, and also started teaching at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris, posts he still holds today. He has three solo marimba albums to his credit—*Four Mallet Ballet* (2004), *Cordes et Lames* (2007), and *Sailing in Seoul* (2014), in addition to numerous other recording collaborations. He has appeared throughout the world as a soloist, clinician, adjudicator, and as timpanist and percussionist with the Paris Orchestra.

When Sammut started playing with the Lyon Opera in 1989, his involvement with the marimba went on a five-year hiatus. He had learned the technique and standard repertoire while in school, but between 1989 and 1994, his focus was on the Opera and exploring other musical outlets. After Dupin passed away, Sammut saw a poster advertising an international competition hosted by Leigh Howard Stevens that was “being dedicated to the memory of two great marimba lovers and teachers who changed the course of music history in their countries: Per Melsaeter, Norway (1955–1987); François Dupin, France (1931–1994).”⁴¹ Although the dedication to his late teacher caught his attention, he did not initially consider participating because he had not played marimba for so long.⁴² The decision to compete was made the following April, after a period of experimenting with improvisation, initially on the vibraphone. In an interview from 2009 he recalled, “...I felt I wanted to improvise more with bass, chords, and melody. For this reason I decided to try it on marimba.”⁴³ Over the next several months, through this experimentation, he developed a level of autonomy at the instrument: “...I could arrange a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴¹ “International Competition Archives,” <https://www.mostlymarimba.com/news-a-events/news/1121-international-competition-archives.html> (accessed 10/25/15).

⁴² Brian Pfeiffer, “An Interview with Éric Sammut,” *Percussive Notes* 49 no. 3 (May 2011), 34.

⁴³ Ibid.

melody I heard five minutes before and play it on the marimba. It was great!”⁴⁴ With this newfound confidence, he decided to begin preparation for the competition. His first two published compositions, *Rotation I* and *Rotation II*, were composed in June and July specifically for the competition.

The Competition and Festival took place from August 8–12 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Asbury Park, NJ. Sixty-one performers from twenty-two different countries participated, and many went on to successful careers as marimbists, percussionists, and composers. This was a historic event – the first-ever international solo marimba competition. In a way, the entire modern history of the marimba was represented through the panel of judges and the repertoire requirements. The judge’s panel consisted of six members: Leigh Howard Stevens, Gordon Stout, Vida Chenoweth, Robert Van Sice, Hiroyoshi Kita, and Bent Lylloff. Of the former three judges, much has been said above regarding their pivotal contributions to the art of marimba in the 20th century. The latter three contributed younger and / or international perspectives. Lylloff (1930–2001) was an internationally recognized percussionist, recording artist, and educator, known as the “Dean of Scandinavian Percussion.”⁴⁵ Van Sice, currently professor of percussion at Yale University, the Peabody Institute, and the Curtis Institute, had been an internationally recognized marimba soloist since the early 1980’s, having studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music and briefly with Keiko Abe. Representing a younger generation was Kita, who had studied at Julliard in the late 1980’s. He had performed frequently in New York City, including a 1992 recital at Carnegie Hall. At the time of the competition he was teaching at the Kobe College in Japan and was an active percussionist with multiple Japanese orchestras.

The competition consisted of four rounds,⁴⁶ in each of which the competitors performed at least two pieces. In Round One, “Standard Repertoire,” all participants performed two specified, standard

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “International Competition Archives,” <https://www.mostlymarimba.com/news-a-events/news/1121-international-competition-archives.html> (accessed 10/25/15).

⁴⁶ Repertoire Requirements taken from Program Notes accessed at “International Competition Archives,” <https://www.mostlymarimba.com/news-a-events/news/1121-international-competition-archives.html> (accessed 10/25/15).

works: Musser’s *Etude in C Major*, and Stout’s *Two Mexican Dances*. For Round Two, “Contemporary Repertoire,” the performers selected one piece from each of the following two lists:

Table 1.1: Round Two—Contemporary Repertoire

Choose one work from the list of five below

Reflections on the Nature of Water	Jacob Druckman
Toccata Fantasy	Raymond Helble
Three Preludes (any three of the nine)	Raymond Helble
Variations on Lost Love	David Maslanka
Night Rhapsody	John Serry

And choose one work from the list of five below

Time for Marimba	Minoru Miki
Velocities	Joseph Schwantner
Rhythmic Caprice	Leigh Howard Stevens
Mirage pour Marimba	Yasuo Sueyoshi
Merlin	Andrew Thomas

All of the pieces in the first list were either commissioned by or written for Leigh Howard Stevens. The second list included two pieces commissioned by Keiko Abe (the Miki and Sueyoshi), along with one written for Stevens (Velocities), one written by Stevens (Rhythmic Caprice), and Merlin, which was written for William Moersch, another highly respected marimba soloist.

Round three was the “Bach” round. Each participant was required to select one of the following three groups:

Table 1.2: Round Three—Bach

A published or personal transcription of a complete Sonata or Partita (from the <i>Sonatas and Partitas</i> for Violin alone)
A Prelude and Fugue from <i>Well-Tempered Clavier</i> Vol. I or II
Two of the following <i>Two Part Inventions</i> No. 1 in C Major No. 4 in D minor No. 8 in F Major No. 14 in B-flat Major

So, through the first three rounds, each phase of development in marimba literature was represented—from transcriptions, to contemporary literature, and finally, to pieces that had become ‘standards.’ The marimba repertoire requirements reached all the way back to Musser’s etudes from the 1940’s, Keiko Abe’s commissions from the 1960’s and 1970’s, pieces from the 1970’s associated with Stout’s and Stevens’ early careers, and newer works from the 1980’s and 1990’s. The judges included individuals

who had close ties to Musser and Abe, and who had each contributed substantially to the development of the marimba as a concert instrument, to the advancement of marimba technique, and to the development of concert marimba repertoire. In many ways, this event marked an apotheosis of what had truly been a Century of Progress for the marimba.

Round Four and Competition Aftermath

The fourth and final round was designated a “Free” round. The only requirements were that the program had to be between ten and twenty minutes in length, and pieces selected for performance in an earlier round could not be repeated. The purpose of this round was expressed in the following suggestion: “The music choosen [sic] may be something completely unknown to the judges if the candidate thinks it best demonstrates her or his artistry on the instrument.”⁴⁷ Éric Sammut, then an unknown performer, stood out among the many competitors. After scoring well in the first three rounds, he took the panel by surprise in the fourth round with the premier of his *Rotations*. As Leigh Howard Stevens recalled in 2004,

*I will always remember the moment in August of 1995 when I first heard the music of Éric Sammut. It was at the first LHS International Marimba Competition in Asbury Park New Jersey, USA. This unknown French guy had been consistently scoring at the top of each of the previous three rounds and we, the jury, were now trying to decide among the seven finalists. This was their final “free choice” repertoire round. The moment Eric launched into his Rotations, uncontrollable smiles broke out on the faces of several of the judges. We were listening to a new kind of marimba music that had never been heard before.*⁴⁸

In an introductory speech before Sammut’s 2009 Showcase Concert at PASIC, Gordon Stout had similar recollections:

I was on the jury of the international Stevens competition when we sat mesmerized listening to this young French man play these Rotations that he'd composed, and we'd never hear them before. And, all of us on the panel were virtually mesmerized by Eric's playing. He's a beautiful musician. His playing, I would characterize as, with elegance

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jasmin Kolberg, *Mosaïque* liner notes, ([Bollschweil]: Vollton Musikverlag, 2004).

*of style, elegance of sound, beautiful musicianship, creativity—he's just a fabulous, fabulous player.*⁴⁹

Éric Sammut was the undisputed winner of the competition, with Kuniko Kato in second place and Hsin-Yi Wu (She-e Wu) in third. This achievement was unexpected to Sammut, who in 1996 described his experience as a big surprise:

*I wanted to participate because this competition was dedicated to my teacher. I performed his piece 'One Excitant' Dance, but I didn't think I would win the competition. I was so surprised with the results because I didn't know where I stood on an international level as a marimba performer.*⁵⁰

In an interview in 2014, looking back on the nearly two decades since the competition, he recollected, “I was not expecting to win [the] competition and for me it was a huge support in my life, because... it was a new world for me. You know, the marimbist world is not big, but it's nice.”⁵¹ Sammut won a Mallettech Imperial Grand 5.0 Octave Marimba, \$1000 worth of music and mallets, and the opportunity to perform a showcase concert at PASIC '96.⁵² During the fall of 1996 he toured the United States, performing concerts and presenting clinics. Thus, his career as a solo marimbist was off to a strong, sudden, exciting start. “I was not expecting at all... the adventure I would have with this instrument.”⁵³

The significance of Sammut's achievement has extended well beyond his own career. Frederic Macarez poignantly referenced the competition in relation to François Dupin in an article from 1998:

*Finally, because I have started this text by quoting François Dupin, I would like to end it by paying tribute to him, in an indirect but so obvious manner. As mentioned earlier, the first International Leigh Howard Stevens Marimba Competition was won in 1995 by a French percussionist, Éric Sammut. He is a former student of Dupin at the C.N.S.M. of Lyon. Could we find better proof of the benefits of our becoming open to the world? Could there be a better reward for our regrettably departed friend?*⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Percussive Arts Society. "PASIC 2009 Éric Sammut Keyboard Showcase Concert," Vimeo, online video [password protected], <https://vimeo.com/131682930> (accessed 1/2/16).

⁵⁰ Lauren Vogel Weiss, "Éric Sammut: Marimba Virtuosity," *Percussive Notes* 34 no. 5 (October 1996): 35.

⁵¹ Éric Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 2," interview by author, Paris, France, December 4, 2014.

⁵² Lauren Vogel Weiss, "Éric Sammut: Marimba Virtuosity," *Percussive Notes* 34 no. 5 (October 1996): 35.

⁵³ Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 2."

⁵⁴ Macarez, 41.

Additionally, in August of 2015, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the competition, Mallettech posted a large collection of competition memorabilia (program notes, newspaper clippings, photographs, etc) to their website. Along with this was a post to Facebook that read,

Today, Éric Sammut is one of the world's leading composers and performers for the marimba. But 20 years ago, this week, he was just a virtually unknown marimba player from France ... who earned first place in the world's first ever international marimba competition.

The 1995 Leigh Howard Stevens International Marimba Competition ran from August 8–12 in Asbury Park, NJ, and featured 61 players from 22 different countries all over the world. Judges included Vida Chenoweth, Hiroyoshi Kita, Bent Lylloff, Leigh Howard Stevens, Gordon Stout and Robert Van Sice.⁵⁵

In response to this post, and as a testament to the impact of the event on the world, a man from Colombia responded with the following comment:

In the audience at that competition were three [C]olombian percussionists and thanks to that experience the Colombian percussion movement [s]tarted[,] specially the marimba... [T]hat[']s why [it] is so important to play always with all your heart[—]you can win something for you but also you can influence other people[,] even a whole country! Thanks to this competition and to Eric now we have marimba music in Colombia.⁵⁶

It cannot be a coincidence that as recently as the summer of 2014, Sammut conducted a master class in Colombia.⁵⁷

In 2013, in a promotional video for the new Marimba degree offered at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, head of percussion Kurt-Hans Goedicke had the following to say about Sammut, who was to be in charge of the program: “Well, for one thing, as we know, there are quite a number of eminent marimba soloists, but certainly Éric Sammut ranks amongst the very greatest of them, and has that reputation worldwide.”⁵⁸ This “worldwide” reputation clearly establishes Sammut’s prominent place in the recent history of the marimba, and the impact his work and achievements have had on an international

⁵⁵ Mallettech, Facebook post, August 12, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1163906550289904&id=128956620451574 (Accessed 12/31/15).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Seminar Clinic

⁵⁸ Royal Conservatoire, "Master of Music (Performance) in Marimba," YouTube, online video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O65zTvAcNE0> (accessed 6/20/16).

scale. The proceeding chapters will more deeply investigate the inner workings of Sammut's music, particularly in terms of *process*—how he thinks about his music, develops his approach to the instrument, and achieves improvisational fluency. At that point the stage will be set to look closely at transcriptions of several live improvisations that demonstrate Sammut's music making in action.

Chapter 2: Philosophical Context

Improvisation plays a central role in the music making of Éric Sammut. However, for many musicians, the art of improvisation is an elusive concept. The present chapter will shed light on this vast topic by sharing perspectives from prominent improvising musicians in comparison with Sammut's thoughts, and will defend the value of improvisation as an artistic and pedagogic asset. Frequent reference will be made to a selection of musicians including Derek Bailey, William Cahn, Kenny Werner, Bill Evans, Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, and Ralph Towner. Bailey and Cahn provide an avant-garde or "free improvisation" perspective; Ruiter-Feenstra specializes in Baroque organ improvisation; Evans and Werner represent the perspective of jazz pianists; and Towner falls somewhere between all of these, having dedicated time to studying classical guitar and jazz piano.

Seeking a Conceptual Definition of Improvisation

Misconceptions

There seem to be vast misconceptions as to what the word *improvisation* really means. In his seminal book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, guitarist Derek Bailey notes that "[i]mprovisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood."¹ On one extreme, "...many classical musicians fear improvisation, as, unlike with Bach, improvisation was not integrated from the beginning of their musical training," holding a "misperception of improvisation as the rapture-in-reverse where improvisation skills land on a few select musicians and miss most of the rest of us."² This fearful attitude by some is contrasted with the opposite extreme, "...widely accepted connotations which imply that improvisation is something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity,

¹ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993): ix.

² Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, *Bach & the Art of Improvisation*, (Ann Arbor, MI: CHI Press, 2011): vi.

frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method.”³ William Cahn, a founding member of the improvisational percussion group Nexus, avoids the term altogether:

*Unfortunately, the word improvisation has become so weighted down by... conceptual baggage that it is tempting to avoid the term altogether in order to avoid negative prejudices and to focus more on the positive effects of its application within a system of pedagogy. For that reason, the simple pedagogy presented in this book is not called free-form improvisation. It is called creative music making (CMM)—a formal structure that is not in any way restrictive of musical content.*⁴

Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, in her book *Bach and the Art of Improvisation*, prefers the term *extemporaneous composition*.⁵ Even Éric Sammut avoids the term in certain contexts: “You don’t need to feel, really, ‘improvisation’—you can feel more like ‘variation.’ It’s simpler.”⁶ Much more will be said regarding Sammut’s variation concept later.

Each improvising musician ultimately develops his or her own ideas about what improvisation is, how to develop it, etc. Jazz club owner and musician Ronnie Scott made the following observations regarding the wide scope of individual improvisational strategy within the jazz idiom:

*But I’m also convinced that there are as many attitudes and conceptions of, and manners of, improvisation, and ways of working towards improvisation, as there are people. Oscar Peterson for instance, is a very, very polished, technically immaculate, performer who—I hope he wouldn’t mind me saying so—trots out these fantastic things that he has perfected and it really is a remarkable performance. Whereas Sonny Rollins, he could go on one night and maybe it’s disappointing, and another night he’ll just take your breath away by his kind of imagination and so forth. And it would be different every night with Rollins.*⁷

The term ‘improvisation’ is, therefore, challenging to define in any concrete sense.

Degrees of Spontaneity

The key is to appreciate the fact that improvisation can come into play at various levels in the music. Music theorist Larry Solomon defines improvisation in the following manner, which captures the hierarchical, fluid nature of the activity:

³ Bailey, xii.

⁴ William L. Cahn, *Creative Music Making*, (New York: Routledge, 2005): 12.

⁵ Ruiter-Feenstra, vi.

⁶ Éric Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1,” interview by author, Paris, France, December 2, 2014.

⁷ Quoted in Bailey, 51.

*Definition: Improvisation involves making decisions affecting the composition of music during its performance. The fundamental ideal of improvisation is the discovery and invention of original music spontaneously, while performing it, without preconceived formulation, scoring, or content, although this is admittedly a limit case. It is improbable that the limit case of no preconception, either by design or past learning, actually exists. Therefore, improvisation is a matter of degree.*⁸

Acoustic guitarist Ralph Towner, whose music straddles the line between classical and jazz, alludes to the same idea in pointing out that "...improvisers take on the added responsibility of the compositional content of the music to varying degrees..."⁹ Whether or not one agrees with Solomon's "fundamental ideal," understanding improvisation as a *degree of spontaneity* usefully highlights the fact that different aspects of music can be improvisational at different times. Sammut speaks of a freedom of choice during performance, pointing out that this freedom stems largely from his experience, contrasting his current attitude with how he played when he was younger:

*I feel when I play, I have a choice all the time. Before, when I began, I said [to] myself, I have to play like THIS - I have to play this because, this is the way I want to follow, this is the line—I need to follow the line to be sure I play well, to be sure, you know? It was more in my head. But now, it's more [in my] ear. I just play. In the moment, I can play this way, or I can improvise, I can do what I want. It's very cool. But it's [after] 160 recitals [of experience].*¹⁰

When he performs a piece more-or-less as written, there is still an element of choice, even if this choice is limited to surface-level detail such as phrasing, dynamics, ornamentation, etc. He makes this point in reference to the performance of his own work, *Caméléon*, which was the opening piece to a recital the previous evening:

*When I play the first piece in a recital, usually I don't improvise; it's like a test for myself physically. I mean, because I travel a lot, and with the jet lag, I never know really physically how I am. So, the first piece is very important for me to play like written, but anyway, I have a choice of interpretation. Yesterday, I did some special dynamics in Caméléon, and phrasing I was using for the first time. But, I didn't take too many risks because I wanted to know physically how I was at the end of the piece.*¹¹

⁸ Larry Solomon, "Improvisation II," *Perspectives of New Music* 24 no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1986): 226.

⁹ Ralph Towner, *Improvisation and Performance Techniques for Classical and Acoustic Guitar*, (Wayne, N.J.: 21st Century Music Productions, 1985): 3.

¹⁰ Éric Sammut, "Seminar Interview," interview by author, Asbury Park, NJ, June 21, 2014.

¹¹ Sammut, "Seminar Interview."

Improvisational Idiom

Derek Bailey distinguishes between two types of improvisation: idiomatic, and non-idiomatic. Improvisation is idiomatic when it fits within or refers to a specific musical idiom, such as jazz, baroque, flamenco, south-Indian Carnatic, etc. Most improvisation belongs to this category. Non-idiomatic improvisation specifically attempts to avoid these references, and can be heard in the completely improvised performances of Nexus, or much of the improvisational avant-garde music of the 1960's. This non-idiomatic improvisation comes closest to Solomon's admittedly theoretical "limit case" above. While some musicians' idioms can be easily identified, in other cases even this becomes nebulous. Keiko Abe is a rare musician who, like Éric Sammut, is both "one of the most well-known solo marimbists in the world,"¹² as well as a well-known improviser. "First I tried to copy artists like Milt Jackson and Lionel Hampton, but one day I realized that these were their voices, not mine. I decided that I needed to find out my own way—my music, my heart."¹³ When asked in an interview whether or not she considers her improvised music 'jazz,' her response was as blunt as it was telling of her attitude toward these sorts of labels: "I don't care." She went on to explain, "Maybe my style is not really jazz, because I came from classical and contemporary background. Maybe it's not exactly jazz, but a really free mood..."¹⁴

Sammut likewise resists this idiomatic labeling. He too acknowledges an admiration for the music of Milt Jackson, and so, given his experience with jazz music and his jazz-influenced harmonic language, when asked if he considers himself a 'jazz musician,' his response was surprising: "I consider [myself] more like a baroque musician. I don't play the [baroque] style particularly, but I just play more like 'variations.'" He elaborates:

I can play jazz. It's possible... On vibes, [with] two mallets. I like two mallets, I like Milt Jackson—I like this kind of jazz. Not too complicated. And I like on the piano also to do jazz. I play pretty well. But on the marimba, I feel more like variations... and when I improvise [on marimba] it's because it's not too complicated; it's just one mode so I can do some variations, different landscape[s] or figures... On the marimba, I prefer to

¹² Lauren Vogel Weiss, "Keiko Abe," *Percussive Notes* 32 no. 3 (June 1994): 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Morris Lang, "A Talk with Keiko Abe, Part 2," *Percussive Notes* 21 no. 5 (July 1983): 20.

*[express] something friendly, something soft and resonating—not too much vertical. So, I feel more like a variations man—Baroque.*¹⁵

Sammut distinguishes between playing ‘jazz’ on piano and vibraphone, and ‘doing variations’ on marimba. Although his jazz-oriented harmonic language remains intact when performing on marimba, his attitude toward the activity changes.

Improvisation and the Instrument

This brings up an important point: Sammut’s sensitivity to the marimba determines his approach to improvisation. Indeed, he makes explicit reference to the fact that each instrument has its own character, its own sensations, and that one must inevitably improvise differently depending on the instrument one plays:

*“Even if I play four mallets, or if I play two mallets—completely different. If I play vibraphone, if I play marimba, piano as well. Each time is [a] different sensation, because [it’s a] different instrument. For this reason, I would like to play all instruments, because I’m sure all instruments are different for the sensation. And it means, we don’t play the same notes. Even [if] you are the same, if you play saxophone or if you play clarinet, you don’t play the same solo at all. Even if it’s the same [fingering], you don’t play the same at all, because the sound, because the way to move, is completely different.”*¹⁶

Ralph Towner has a similar attitude toward the development of his improvisational language on the acoustic guitar. Even while having worked as a jazz pianist who modeled his approach on that of Bill Evans, his guitar improvisations make minimal reference to traditional jazz language. When asked if he made a deliberate decision to not sound like a bebop player, he responded,

*No! Yeah, maybe, but not really—I didn’t start out to not do something. I played this instrument [the acoustic guitar] because I liked the way it sounded. I wanted to learn to play it to make it sound as well as I possibly could... I stopped playing any jazz at all while I studied this instrument. So, at the end of the year I could play classical concerts. I played some. But, to play bebop on this thing, to play [a] bebop-like phrase, you have to have REALLY good technique, or it sounds sort of silly and bouncy, and I could name a few old players that tried but I won’t.*¹⁷

¹⁵ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

¹⁶ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

¹⁷ AreaMusicCbaCultura, “Notas de Paso - Cba Jazz Fest 2012 - Towner & Giroto Parte 2/3,” YouTube, online video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhewUd2rn5E> (accessed 6/20/16).

So the exploration of the instrument itself informs any artist's improvisational strategy. As Derek Bailey states, "[the instrument] is a source of material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of the natural resources of the instrument."¹⁸

Improvisation as a Holistic Endeavor

Improvisation, then, is affected by many variables. The best improvisers draw inspiration from the instrument, the environment, their own feelings, and the music going on around them, on a moment-by-moment basis. Jazz pianist Keith Jarrett makes this clear in his description of improvisation. "By virtue of the holistic quality of it [improvisation], it takes everything to do it. It takes real time; no editing is possible. It takes your nervous system to be on alert for every possible thing, in a way that cannot be said for any other kind of music."¹⁹ Harry Evans offers a similar sentiment:

*And it's this type of challenge that you have to direct yourself for that moment, and you have to call on all your energies, and intellect, and physical energies and aesthetic energies and aesthetic sensitivity to your environment, and pour it all into this one moment, and you don't have time to even reflect on it.*²⁰

Éric Sammut likewise allows his own energies and feelings to direct his improvisations. Many factors come into play, and most of these factors boil down to a real-time feeling based on the circumstances of a particular performance:

*Depending [on] a lot of things of course, [the] quality of the instrument, the acoustic, the moment when I play the arrangement, if the audience is very receptive or not, if it's cold, if it's warm, depending also if I feel good, or if I'm tired—depending [on] a lot of things. In any case, when the acoustic is easy to play, I mean the resonance—[when there is] not TOO much but a minimum of resonance, I can do more improvisation. And also, if I feel very well the harmony—some days I'm feeling more 'notes.' If I feel more 'notes' it's difficult for me to improvise, but if I feel very well the chords, I can do a lot of things. I can do variations, and also if I feel my playing is very easy this day, I can improvise.*²¹

Fluidity of meter is a hallmark of Sammut's music, particularly when looking at his published scores.

How he feels meter on a particular day also affects his improvisations. When he feels tied to a particular

¹⁸ Bailey, 99.

¹⁹ Keith Jarrett, *The Art of Improvisation*, dir. Michael Dibb, DVD video, ([United States]: EuroArts Music International, 2005).

²⁰ Bill Evans, Harry Evans, and Steve Allen, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans: The Creative Process and Self-Teaching*, DVD video, (New York, N.Y.: Rhapsody Films, 1991).

²¹ Éric Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 3," interview by author, Paris, France, December 2, 2014.

meter, he doesn't feel as free to improvise. When he's not so concerned about maintaining a strict meter, improvisation comes more naturally. He explains:

Also, if I feel I don't care about metrics, for example. Some days I want to play really in the structure [of the meter]. So, those days it's difficult for me to improvise. But when I don't care about it - when I can play one bar in 4, the other one in 15/16, or 17/16, or 17 and a half /16—I just play as I feel. If I decide by feeling to play without metric, it's really easy for me to play.²²

So, improvisation ultimately relies on an openness and availability, one might say a *vulnerability*, to real-time factors in the moment. This is a central aspect of many great improvisers' music, which differentiates it from a stricter, more controlled mode of performance—as Sammut said, following the line to be sure one plays well. There is a unique sort of risk inherent in improvisation.

Improvisation as a Process

Sammut's self-identification as a 'baroque musician' opens up a comparison between his improvisational approach and baroque performance practice. His particular style of improvising will be investigated later, and while a detailed account of historically informed baroque performance is outside the scope of this project, the concept of 'variation' will be elaborated. It is worth noting that there has been some scholarly work done in the area of comparing jazz music with the baroque, going back to at least 1949.²³ Additionally, jazz pianist Bill Evans presented a pragmatic analysis of the relationship between improvisation in jazz and in Western classical music in a video from 1966, titled "The Universal Mind of Bill Evans: The Creative Process and Self-Teaching."

I think [jazz] is more of a revival, in a different form, of what went on in classical music before. In other words, in the 17th century, there was a great deal of improvisation in classical music, as you know. And because of the fact that there were no electrical recording techniques or any way to permanize or to 'catch' music, and to record it, the music was written so it could be permanized that way... Finally, improvisation became a lost art in classical music and we have only the composer and the interpreter. So, the composer even, very seldom improvised, or didn't have to, say around the late 1800's or

²² Ibid.

²³ Hans-Peter Schmitz, "Baroque Music and Jazz," trans. Dominique-Rene de Lerma, *The Black Perspective in Music* 7 no. 1 (Spring 1979): 75–80.

*the turn of the century. But jazz has in a way resurrected that process, which I call the jazz process.*²⁴

And later,

*I feel that jazz is not so much a style as a process of making music. It's the process of making one minute's music in one minute's time... [W]e must remember that in an absolute sense, jazz is more a certain creative process of spontaneity than a style. Therefore you might say that Chopin, or Bach, or Mozart or whoever improvised music, that is, was able to make music of the moment, was in a sense playing jazz.*²⁵

Evans emphasizes repeatedly that improvisation is first and foremost a *process*, and that process transcends idiom and musical language. For this reason, there is a great deal of conceptual overlap between various forms of improvised music. While Sammut's music does not fall strictly within either a baroque or a jazz idiom, but rather draws on many musics (he acknowledges that "[m]any sources have influenced me. The music I'm drawn to is anything from the Romantic Era, such as Strauss, jazz standards, Latin, Indian, or African music"²⁶), it is precisely this *process* that melds the diverse influences into a cohesive, artistic whole.

The term *improvisation* remains elusive. The closest one can come to a general definition seems to be that it is a creative process whereby aspects of a musical performance are placed under spontaneous control to varying degrees. To be more specific than this, one would have to investigate a particular school or an individual artist's approach—a task to be tackled in due time.

Artistic Integrity, Creativity, and Innovation

A word should be said about artistic integrity and creativity, and how these funnel into innovation. Ralph Towner remarked, "The development of a personal and recognizable style is a concern for all creative musicians,"²⁷ and Leigh Howard Stevens has noted this quality in Sammut's work.²⁸ Sammut's music represents an innovation in marimba composition and performance, and artistic innovation is only possible when an artist has the courage to develop his or her own voice, their own

²⁴ Evans, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Pfeifer, 34.

²⁷ Towner, 82.

²⁸ Kolberg, *Mosaïque* liner notes.

approach to their medium. As Nexus member Russell Hartenberger stated, “If the goal [of music] is to appeal to a certain number of people, there's a danger of not being true to yourself. Each person has to present the music that's true to one's self, or there's a phony aspect to it.”²⁹ Sammut recalls that during his formative period, when he began experimenting with improvisation on the marimba, he had a strong desire to do something on his own. “I needed to go and lose myself somewhere, and to do by myself something.” And so, he “...decided to go somewhere without anything, just an instrument and four mallets. No score, nothing. Lost, completely lost.”³⁰ He elaborated on this feeling of being “lost” by metaphorically comparing his musical experience to getting “out of the system” and moving to the mountains, learning to survive on one’s own.

Of course, all my studies, all my education, all my knowledge, was helpful, but not immediately, because when you go to the mountains, it takes time. What's the way to hunt a rabbit? [laughs] Wow. Did I learn this in school? Not really. How can I live with nothing? How is it possible? So, you have questions, and then you stop the questions. You just go; you just try to understand where you are. This is [the] mountains—just open your eyes. And then, step-by-step, you [gain understanding], and then, [you make] connections.³¹

Uncertainty is an inevitable companion to innovation. Overcoming this uncertainty is a matter of attitude, and a *playful* attitude is a great help. In her book, *The Rise*, Sarah Lewis emphasizes the value of playfulness, with a whole chapter dedicated to the subject and its implications for innovation in any field. As she points out, “[p]layfulness lets us withstand enormous uncertainty.”³² Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra echoes this point in *Bach and the Art of Improvisation*, where in discussing Bach’s mindset toward musical development she notes that “...an open, loving, playful childlike attitude encourages the aspiring improviser to listen intently, imitate, experiment, muse about what does not work and why, and hone

²⁹ Cahn, 2.

³⁰ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014): 153.

skills for success.”³³ In describing his own attitude toward his development, Sammut admits, “I began to do improvisation like a game... It was a game for me.”³⁴

During the TEDxRVA Conference on March 22, 2013 in Richmond, VA, artist, business executive, and entrepreneur Ivy Ross spoke on her collaborative project known as *Project Platypus*, which she had developed while working at Mattel. The project consisted of pulling twelve employees out of their daily jobs and putting them in a playful, creative environment where they could think outside the box, with the goal of generating new, innovative ideas. This approach proved extremely successful. Ross described this creative environment by stating, “The team was free to play... Play was the center of how we operated. For eight weeks, the team played with each other, and played with ideas, suspending judgment and deadlines...”³⁵ This suspension of judgment and deadline is the fruit of a playful attitude. Sammut described a similar experience, suspending his own judgment in the face of uncertainty and doubt in order to do what he felt he had to do:

*I was not judging myself. I just [said], ‘Ok, I’m not good. I don’t care. I just want to do [this] by myself. And even if I’m really bad, I don’t care. Nobody knows about what I’m doing. But, I want to experience this. I want to experiment.’ And step-by-step, I became myself.*³⁶

Improvisation as a Learned Skill

Understanding the Learning Procedure

That which I have achieved by industry and practice, anyone else with tolerable natural gift and ability can also achieve. And for this very reason the alleged impossibility falls to the ground. One can do anything if only one really wishes to, and if one industriously strives to convert natural abilities, by untiring zeal, into finished skills.

—Johann Abraham Birnbaum, 1738³⁷

Learning to improvise is a long-term, and in fact a lifelong, endeavor. The above quotation, however, is a firm reminder that, with dedication and focus, even that which at first seems impossible, can

³³ Ruiter-Feenstra, 20.

³⁴ Éric Sammut, “Seminar Clinic,” attended by author, Asbury Park, NJ, June 21, 2014.

³⁵ TEDx Talks, “Patterns of Possibility: Ivy Ross at TEDxRVA 2013,” YouTube, online video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooFhw9ZfN-I> (accessed 5/28/16).

³⁶ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

³⁷ Ruiter-Feenstra, 19.

be achieved. Bill Evans had a similar view, referring not only to improvisation, but also to success in any field:

*The person that succeeds in anything has the realistic viewpoint at the beginning in knowing that the problem is large and that he has to take it a step at a time and he has to enjoy the step-by-step learning procedure.*³⁸

This statement alludes to two very important aspects of learning any complex skill: the step-by-step nature of the learning procedure, and the enjoyment of it. Learning to enjoy the gradual accumulation of knowledge and skill leads to a lifetime of growth. If one can achieve a playful attitude as discussed above, this opens up the possibility for true enjoyment of learning. Appreciating the step-by-step process is important, as this informs one's approach to setting goals and practicing. Sammut frequently emphasizes this process, pointing out that each step should be mastered before moving to the next.

*The best way is to go step by step. [Most importantly]—before [changing] anything—is to feel well [about] what you are doing. And then when you're OK, you feel OK, now [you] can go to the next step. But be sure it's never difficult to do. Never... If you want to be in trust and really increase your level, it's important to be in trust all the time.*³⁹

This approach—to take one step at a time and feel “in trust” at each step—is the most direct route to improvisation at any level. One of J. S. Bach's students, Johann Kirnberger, provided insight into the power of Bach's step-by-step pedagogy, remarking that “[Bach's] method is best, for he proceeds steadily, step by step, from the easiest to the most difficult, and as a result even the step to the fugue has only the difficulty of passing from one step to the next.”⁴⁰

Improvising musicians repeatedly emphasize this concept. The great ragtime xylophone soloist George Hamilton Green offered nearly identical advice in his now classic method book, *Instruction Course for Xylophone*: “Don't be discouraged if these variations, rhythms, etc. seem difficult at first. If you start at the bottom and work up, step by step, you will gradually get to a point where the entire idea of

³⁸ Evans, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*.

³⁹ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁴⁰ Ruiter-Feenstra, 7.

improvising will seem easy.”⁴¹ Jazz pianist Kenny Werner reiterates the importance of thoroughly mastering each step in the process, pointing out that “[f]or something to be mastered on your instrument, it must feel as simple as *playing one note*.”⁴² The overarching message from so many musicians is that there are no shortcuts, and that before moving on, each step must feel *easy*. When each step is a source of enjoyment, the whole process can become a joy. Sammut recommends holding fast to this sense of enjoyment as a key element in artistic growth.⁴³

Technique, Theory, and Spontaneity

Ultimately, the act of improvisation involves real-time manipulation of the physical and theoretical mechanics of music—instrumental technique and music theory—to create sound. However, this fact can lead to another misconception about improvisation, which is that this manipulation is very deliberate and conscious. In reality, the best improvisers achieve their control and flow precisely because they are *not* conscious of the mechanics of music. Their minds are occupied with other factors such as their feelings, environment, etc., as outlined above. As Éric Sammut put it, during performance, one’s focus must be on “*where* you want to go—not how or why.”⁴⁴ The mechanical side of music must be relegated to the subconscious. Bill Evans provided insight into this concept in an interview that took place in 1970.

Interviewer: You do project an image of an intellectual jazz musician. How far does the intellect go?

*Bill Evans: Only as far as being a student, really. That's as far as it can go because intellectually you couldn't manipulate yourself fast enough, intellectually, to play. I mean, jazz is a certain process that's not an intellectual process. You use your intellect to take apart the materials and learn to understand them and learn to work with them. But actually, it takes years and years and years of playing to develop the facility so that you could forget all of that, and just relax and just play.*⁴⁵

⁴¹ George Hamilton Green, *Instruction Course for Xylophone: A Complete Course of Fifty Lessons* (Milwaukee, WI: Meredith Music, 1984): 160.

⁴² Kenny Werner, *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within*, (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996): 101.

⁴³ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

⁴⁴ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

⁴⁵ Bill Evans, Eddie Gomez, Marty Morell, *Bill Evans Trio Live in Helsinki 1970*, DVD video, ([S.l.]: JazzShots, 2009).

With this statement, Evans highlights the primary difference between practicing and performing, and how music theory and technique interact and inform spontaneous performance. In practice, the intellect is applied to “understand” (through music theory) and “work with” (through instrumental technique) musical material. The goal is for theory and technique to become unified. When they are unified, and not a moment sooner, one will be able to “forget all that” and “just play.” Kenny Werner puts this same concept in slightly different terms:

*And let's define technique in jazz. Technique is not merely finger speed, or the ability to move your hands. Technique is the use of rhythm, harmony, and melody. So, I look at everything that goes into the language of the music as technique. And you want to sharpen your technique to be as fine and as versatile and as flowing as possible, so that when that wind of the spirit blows through you, it can blow through the filter of these marvelous chords, harmonies, rhythms, and melodies.*⁴⁶

Éric Sammut has his own way of describing this process of unification:

*To learn the harmony... chords and harmonic [progression]... We have a lot of things to learn. But, we don't need to learn it in theory, I think. Practicing is the best [way] to learn the harmony.*⁴⁷

During Bach's time and before, learning an instrument implied learning to improvise, because theory and technique were not departmentalized as they are today. Over the course of the Romantic period and the early 20th century they became disconnected, and the decline of improvisation as standard practice in music education was a natural result. One of Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra's stated goals in writing *Bach and the Art of Improvisation* was to “revive a common practice approach of integrating the once unified aspects of musicianship,”⁴⁸ an approach embraced by improvising musicians of all stripes, but rarely found in standard music pedagogy. More will be said about the pedagogic value of improvisation later.

The unification of theory and technique necessarily requires a well-developed instrumental technique in the first place. Bach in fact required that all of his students, at the beginning of their studies,

⁴⁶ Kenny Werner and Falk Willis, *Kenny Werner Effortless Mastery of Melody, Harmony & Rhythm*, DVD video, ([New York]: JazzHeaven.com, 2013).

⁴⁷ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁴⁸ Ruiter-Feenstra, ix.

practice specific technical exercises to develop touch and fingering, for at least six to twelve months.⁴⁹ In an article titled “The Education of the Jazz Musician,” Sean Petrahn wrote of the need for a precise technique in jazz improvisation, stating,

*The jazz improviser is limited by his technique. There is not one fraction of a second hesitation while improvising, otherwise he loses the ‘flow.’ It is a myth to think that an improviser hears internally more than he can play. It’s always the other way around: you only create ideas that can be executed with precision; otherwise, you would stutter and stammer, hopelessly.*⁵⁰

Jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton holds the same high regard for well-developed technique:

*The complete technique is one which possesses the ability to execute anything the player desires, with the best of control. Set no bounds on the possibilities. Work for gaining speed, control and freedom from restriction or regimentation (not for technique’s sake, but for musical freedom).*⁵¹

This technique is developed as a means to an end, which is the spontaneous act of musical creation with “not one fraction of a second hesitation while improvising.” Bill Evans refers to this as the subconscious; Kenney Werner refers to the same phenomenon as developing “muscle memory.” Sammut refers to this as the development of *reflexes*:

*It’s better to have a physical sensation—motion—for improvising, than to learn one billion pages of theory. It doesn’t help, really, for playing improvisation. What is very helpful is to have good reflexes. And reflexes with separate hands are the best.*⁵²

Intellectual understanding (learning “one billion pages of theory”) does nothing for improvisation unless it is connected to technique, forming these musical reflexes. Step by step, these reflexes gradually develop into a well of knowledge to draw from during performance. And, as Kenny Werner warns, “Nothing puts a crimp in spontaneity more than a momentary lapse in knowledge.”⁵³

Practicing

Leigh Howard Stevens (“the world’s greatest classical marimbist”) has credited Vida Chenoweth with teaching him how to practice. In an interview, Chenoweth gave the following advice on practicing:

⁴⁹ Ruiter-Feenstra, 7.

⁵⁰ Jack Reilly, *The Harmony of Bill Evans*, (Brooklyn, NY: Unichrom, 1993): vii.

⁵¹ Gary Burton, *Introduction to Jazz Vibes*, (Chicago, Illinois: Ludwig Drum Co, 1965): 4.

⁵² Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

⁵³ Werner, *Effortless Mastery*, 104.

“One should attempt to abolish anything in practice that would feed rubbish into the computer. Eliminate any doodling, any 'side' noises, (my mother used to call it 'drumming' on the piano), because all that goes into the computer process.” The interviewer asked her if she was referring to her by then notorious “no-mistake” practice system. She responded,

Well, not only no-mistake, but NO-NONSENSE. Concentrate during the period of time that you're at the instrument—even if it's 20 minutes—and if your mind is wanting to divert then do something else. Go sit down and have your cup of coffee, but don't stand there with the cup of coffee in one hand and doodle with the other with your attention divided.⁵⁴

Vida Chenoweth and Leigh Howard Stevens are not improvising musicians. Yet, it is extremely important for the aspiring improviser to understand that effective practicing of pre-composed pieces is nearly identical to practicing improvisational material—the act of practicing presents many of the same challenges and pitfalls in either case. Compare Chenoweth’s comment above with Ralph Towner’s practice recommendation:

Opt for musical intensity and concentration in your practice time. If your attention to what you are hearing wanders, take a break. Both the mind and the muscles won't retain information if you lapse into scanning the musical material. When you practice with an attention for vivid details, this vividness will find its way subconsciously into your normal playing of music.⁵⁵

Compare again, to Kenny Werner’s advice:

This practicing must be very focused, very intentional. The length of time you practice must be limited to the length of time you can remain [focused]. Then you must STOP! Or you will compromise the deliberateness of the practice. In this way, five or ten minutes of practice is preferable to two hours of rambling.⁵⁶

From the ‘classical’ perspective of Chenoweth, the jazz perspective of Werner, and the hybrid perspective of Towner, all three musicians emphasize the same major point: concentration is essential to good practicing. One should only practice for as long as focus can be maintained. Doodling, scanning, and rambling are traps to be avoided if progress is desired. The next issue to arise is in deciding what exactly to practice. While the source of the material will vary in every case, there is once again a consensus

⁵⁴ Holly Hufford, "Backstage with Vida Chenoweth," *Percussive Notes* 19 no. 3 (Spring/Summer 1981): 71–72.

⁵⁵ Towner, 82.

⁵⁶ Werner, *Effortless Mastery of Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm*.

across the spectrum of classical and jazz musicians. Mark Ford, in his book *Marimba: Technique Through Music*, advises students to “[f]ocus on a small amount of music at a time and develop it to the best of your ability. For example, focus on one phrase at a time and develop all aspects of that music such as the style, dynamics, stickings, and tempo, etc.”⁵⁷ Once again turning to Kenny Werner, he describes a hypothetical situation where he is practicing a particular ‘line’ (melodic passage intended for use in improvisation):

*If I take a line, I’m not thinking about all the other lines. I’m working on that line—nothing else in the universe exists until that line plays itself. That is a good standard, because by the time the chords play themselves, or the rhythms play themselves, or the lines play themselves, that means not only that you play that line well, but you’ve developed new muscle memory. Because you see, when you have muscle memory you don’t have to try.*⁵⁸

In both cases, the musicians recommend focusing on a *small amount of material*. If one is practicing a pre-composed piece, this material most likely comes from a technical exercise or a score. If one is practicing improvisational material, it could in fact derive from an exercise, a score, a recording, or the player’s own creativity. Indeed, there is a compositional aspect to the development of an improvisational vocabulary. Once a specific exercise, passage, phrase, line, or idea is selected for practice, the act of actually *improving one’s execution* of said material is the same in all cases.

The only major difference between practicing for improvised and non-improvised performances is that when practicing improvisational material, especially when the goal is to improvise within some harmonic framework, everything must ultimately relate back to the abstract structure of this framework.

Bill Evans provides a description of this concept:

*For one thing it’s very important to remember that no matter how far I might diverge or find freedom in this format, that it only is free insofar as it has reference to the strictness of the original form, and that’s what gives it its strength. In other words, there is no freedom without being in reference to something. Now if you take this strict form and you find some way to get away from it, that gives it a meaning... When I’m playing, I’m playing everything I play against the strict squareness of the original form.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Mark Ford, *Marimba: Technique Through Music*, (Nashville: Innovative Percussion, 2005): 6.

⁵⁸ Werner, *Effortless Mastery of Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm*.

⁵⁹ Bill Evans, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*.

One practical example would be placing melodic lines into the context of the harmonic progression of a standard jazz tune. Being able to play a line well is merely a *prerequisite* for incorporating that line into one's vocabulary; being able to play a line well *within a specific harmonic context* is the additional step necessary to begin using it in an improvisational situation. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the underlying musical structure in question. One of the main benefits of studying improvisation is that it promotes a deeper, structural understanding of music. An excellent treatment of this subject in terms of melodic improvisation in the jazz idiom can be found in jazz pianist Bert Ligon's book, *Connecting Chords with Linear Harmony*.⁶⁰ For a very thorough exposition of structural understanding in the German Baroque idiom, see Michael Callahan's dissertation, "Techniques of Keyboard Improvisation in the German Baroque and Their Implications for Today's Pedagogy."⁶¹

As will be demonstrated in time, the improvisations of Éric Sammut maintain reference to a fundamental structure. His exercises consistently combine technique with harmonic and melodic exploration, in a manner that specifically takes into consideration the possibilities and challenges of the Stevens technique and the marimba.

Improvisation as a Pedagogic Asset

Practical Benefits

I think improvising is very important to learning music... If you're a jazz student the benefits are obvious, but I think many people may not realize the positive effect this could have on playing in any genre.
—Éric Sammut⁶²

Learning to improvise provides many positive benefits. Developing this skill to any degree, even if one's goal is not to improvise in live performance, is a worthwhile pursuit. Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra enumerates some of the many practical benefits of exploring improvisation:

Even if a musician has no plans to improvise publicly, learning to improvise enhances repertoire playing because of the attentiveness to structure and flow it demands.

⁶⁰ Bert Ligon, *Connecting Chords with Linear Harmony*, (Lebanon, IN: Houston Pub, 1996).

⁶¹ Michael Richard Callahan, "Techniques of Keyboard Improvisation in the German Baroque and Their Implications for Today's Pedagogy," (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2010).

⁶² Quoted in Pfeifer, 35.

*Improvising also sharpens memory and analytical thinking, heightens musical understanding and musicianship, improves technique, develops sight reading in patterns, and strengthens listening skills.*⁶³

Improvisation provides an excellent laboratory for the practical application of theoretical concepts. This promotes a deeper cognitive and aural grasp of the various elements of music, which can inform interpretive decisions, and open up creative possibilities. Improvising with specific scales and chords enhances analytic, tactile, as well as aural understanding and recognition. Improvising within a form strengthens one's sense of overall musical construction. Yawen Eunice Chyu, in her dissertation, "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels," recommends a system of pedagogy wherein young students are encouraged to think analytically and creatively, improvising simple variations on elementary-level piano literature in a structured format. The system then progresses to applying the same concepts to intermediate-level pieces, and eventually opens up to improvising on chords, and within simple forms.⁶⁴ Promoting this sort of thinking early in the educational process gives the students an opportunity to explore music and their instrument, and this sense of exploration becomes an integral part of their musical upbringing.

According to William Cahn, the many benefits of fostering an "improvisational mindset" include:

*A deeper knowledge of the instruments and their sound-making possibilities; A deeper level of listening—to one's self and to other ensemble members—focusing on an acute awareness of the sounds being made; A more developed intuitive sense in making appropriate musical responses; An increased ability to embrace the sounds produced by others; An increased confidence in musical expression and risk taking.*⁶⁵

Cahn's emphasis is on the cultivation of *awareness* rather than technical or theoretical knowledge. He particularly highlights listening skills and intuition—two aspects of music making that are crucial to improvisation. He mentions also a "deeper knowledge of instruments and their sound-making possibilities." The freedom to explore an instrument on one's own is a very valuable educational

⁶³ Ruiter-Feenstra, ix.

⁶⁴ Yawen Eunice Chyu, "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels," (DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 2004).

⁶⁵ Cahn, 3.

experience. As John Stevens points out, “[i]t has to be realized that a person’s own investigation of an instrument—his exploration of it—is totally valid.”⁶⁶ This *validation* of one’s own musical exploration is the key point to this entire discussion. When one feels their creative impulses are *valid*, this opens the door to a more personal creative freedom, and to the possibility of artistic innovation. Derek Bailey notes that a typical Western musical education “...teaches that the creation of music is a separate activity from playing [an] instrument.”⁶⁷ Eliminating this separation is a direct path to creative validation.

Personal Benefits

If there is to be a goal involved throughout your musical studies, it might be to maintain and heighten the sense of fascination that drew you to music initially.
—Ralph Towner⁶⁸

Maintaining a connection to a “sense of fascination” leads to a lifetime of musical growth and enjoyment. William Cahn remarks that exploring improvisation, in his case free-form improvisation or “Creative Music Making,” is an effective means of “...remaining in contact with the inner musician—the spirit that was touched by the expressive power of music in the first place.”⁶⁹ He also points out that

*It is not uncommon in the education of musicians at all levels for there to be so much emphasis on acquiring technical skills that concerns about individual expression and personal fulfillment—the very things that often inspire the pursuit of music in the first place—are overlooked or neglected.*⁷⁰

For these reasons, improvisation holds enormous value within a system of pedagogy. This is *not* meant to devalue the external facets of musical training—technical proficiency; high scores in competitive activities; even career development—but rather to bring the more personal, life-enriching aspects of music-making into the fold of contemporary music education. Bill Dobbins provides a forceful critique of music education that highlights in a dramatic way what is lost when improvisation plays no role in one’s musical experience:

⁶⁶ Quoted in Bailey, 98.

⁶⁷ Bailey, 98.

⁶⁸ Towner, 82.

⁶⁹ Cahn, 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

*The most crucial question, in the final analysis, to which an honest answer must be found is simply this: What are our real motivations in musically educating our children? Do we wish to educate them so that they can dutifully perform for our own edification and entertainment in the concert hall or on the football field? Or do we wish to educate them so that they can enrich themselves through musical self-expression and communication? If we choose the latter, then improvisation is an essential tool for initiating the process of discovering and developing the music within oneself.*⁷¹

Éric Sammut has maintained his love for music throughout his career. His creative output, largely built on his improvisational approach to the marimba, allows him to explore a broad range of music, simply for the pleasure of it: “I like to play all music [that] I like.”⁷² For him, the marimba is primarily a source of enjoyment: “this is more important—when I play marimba, I want to have pleasure.” He even admits that, although he has built a career around the marimba, he considers his teaching and his work with the Orchestre de Paris to be his “real job,” while playing the marimba remains almost like a hobby. As he points out, some people play sports, some people watch television, some people love to party—Éric Sammut plays marimba. “What I feel for the marimba—it's like oxygen for me... I want to keep it like a garden: a secret garden.”⁷³

⁷¹ Bill Dobbins, “Improvisation: An Essential Element of Music Proficiency,” *Music Educator's Journal* 66 no. 5 (January 1980): 41.

⁷² Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁷³ Ibid.

Chapter 3: Fundamental Components

Given the holistic nature of improvisation, a performer's fundamental approach to their instrument, especially in the case of such a physical instrument as the marimba, is highly relevant. In an interview, Chick Corea expressed the importance of one's physical approach in relation to sound and artistic emulation regarding his early years of transcribing and practicing the solos of Bud Powell:

I would be able to play his notes but it would never sound the same somehow. So... I put a couple of speakers up years ago [beside] my ears... while I'm sitting at the piano and tuned it up to a similar volume that I had coming from the piano at me, and I did the exercise of trying to just sink in with his lines, and I found myself bending my body in different ways, ...and later on, when I saw Bud that one time at Birdland it was actually how he was playing. It's like I got into the body positions.¹

For this reason, Sammut's physical approach to the instrument will not be overlooked. Also included here are exercises and concepts designed to facilitate refined technique and sound, familiarize oneself with keys and harmony, acquire spatial awareness, strengthen one's ear, develop what Sammut refers to as *anticipation*, practice the separation of the hands through polyrhythm, and develop a *polyphonic approach* to marimba performance.

Fundamental Physical Approach

Posture

Sammut's physical approach to the marimba can be summarized in one word: *lightness*. In terms of posture, he forces nothing, but simply imagines that he is being suspended from above with a thin string attached to the top of his head. This allows him to stand with an open chest cavity in a tension-free, upright, and confident position, not leaning over the instrument, and without tilting his head downward. During performance, whether playing solo marimba or playing percussion in an orchestra, he maintains this suspended feeling while achieving balance, keeping the weight of his body evenly distributed between his feet. There is flexibility—nothing is restricted and he can lean left and right as needed—

¹ Chick Corea, *Rendezvous in New York*, DVD video. ([New York]: Ideal Entertainment, 2005).

however, his goal is to remain “stable, but light.” He remarks that this light, open feeling helps to “open his mind” when composing or arranging.²

Thoughts on Mallet Grips

In terms of grip, Sammut generally uses the Stevens technique / grip, although he pointed out that increasingly he tends to use different four-mallet grips depending on the music he is playing. He does not feel that one grip is better than another, but simply that each is “interesting” and that each provides different advantages, and applies more readily to certain repertoire and certain situations. For example, “when you play some piece like *Marimba Spiritual*, if you play with the traditional grip, the control of the interior mallet is very good, because this mallet is above the exterior, so you have good control. It’s completely natural to play with this grip.”³ He points out that Keiko Abe’s music feels best with cross-grip, while his own music, as well as that of, for example, Leigh Howard Stevens and Michael Burritt, feels best with the Stevens technique, because “we compose in this way, and the feeling we have with Stevens [technique] is more lateral.”⁴ He does feel that the Stevens technique affords the player greater note accuracy, due to the fact that “for each interval the interior mallet has a position in the hand,” and that once one knows each interval by *feel*, rather than by looking or thinking about it, a lot of control is gained. He points out that cross-grip provides more power and sound projection, and for this reason usually uses cross-grip when playing a marimba concerto with an orchestra. He also uses cross-grip when playing vibraphone, because he feels that the metal bars of the vibraphone demand more attack, while the wooden bars of the marimba respond well to a lighter touch. Ultimately, when playing solo marimba, he prefers to use the Stevens technique.

Basic Strokes and Sound Production

For Sammut, the development of basic stroke motion goes hand-in-hand with the development of a personal sound on the instrument. His fundamental sound production / technique exercises involve

² Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

³ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁴ Ibid.

three basic stroke-types derived from the Stevens technique: Double Vertical strokes, Single Independent strokes, and Single Alternating strokes. In each case, the motion is not restricted to the wrist alone, but incorporates larger muscle groups from the arms, shoulders, and even the back. He points out that sound production involves the whole body. Even if two people play with the same set of mallets, they will sound different, because “the sound is the I.D., like [a] passport... Which sound do you want to have on the instrument?” In order for this to be possible, the player must be *available* physically, and must be focused on the fullness of their sound rather than simply on the movements they are making. They must relax and breathe, while *listening* and *feeling*, rather than *thinking*. In this way, they will be able to discover and develop their personal sound. This concept is relevant regardless of the instrument. As Sammut says, “To play an instrument, it’s a balance between what you want to hear and what you want to feel.”⁵

Sammut’s first sound-production exercise, and in fact the first exercise he plays during his daily warm-up routine, is to play a series of double vertical strokes (at least 8–10 if not more) on a medium-sized interval slowly, one hand at a time, while the other arm relaxes at one’s side. The idea is to incorporate arm motion and focus on producing a full sound with each stroke. The motion resembles a slow-motion Moeller stroke in that the motion is initiated at the shoulder, with the rest of the arm and wrist flowing upward and back down in response. Nothing is forced and there is no tension—this is simply a way of generating a big, full sound with a big, full motion as smoothly and naturally as possible.

Example 3.1: Basic Stroke and Sound Development⁶

♩ = 100
Exercise 1A (Utilizing Double Vertical Strokes)

⁵ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 2.”

⁶ Éric Sammut, “Four Steps to Feel Well at the Marimba,” clinic materials presented at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, Columbus, Ohio, November 2–5, 2005.

This same basic exercise can incorporate single independent and single alternating strokes as well. In the case of the single alternating strokes, the arm motion will have to be reduced, but the goal is still to incorporate the larger muscles, rather than restricting the movement to the wrists. In all three cases, the unused arm hangs at the side, allowing one to focus exclusively on the active hand. Strive to get the same full, consistent sound between each stroke and between the hands.

Example 3.2: Further Stroke and Sound Development Exercises⁷

♩ = 100
Exercise 1B (Utilizing Single Independent Strokes)

Exercise 1C (Utilizing Single Independent Strokes)

Dynamics and Touch

Éric Sammut has developed a delicate touch on the marimba. He described his attitude toward dynamics in an interview in 2009:

*...I don't feel like the music flows well if everything is played too loud. My interpretation of dynamics is probably quieter than many other people, but it makes for great effect if you save that forte for when you really mean it. I also think that by playing at a lower level dynamically, you can bring out more nuances in your playing without having to smash the keys.*⁸

He prefers to play in as relaxed a manner as possible—"I don't use too much energy when I play... I don't like to play with a bunch of force." When playing, he feels as if he is floating over the marimba, like a boat on the sea. He finds the touch of the wooden keys to be an interesting aspect of the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pfeiffer, 34.

instrument: “We don’t need to hit it too much—just contact is enough.”⁹ He develops and maintains this touch through his method of practicing. Although his signature line of Malletech mallets are described on the Malletech website as having “unusually heavy heads,”¹⁰ he does nearly all his practicing with light, soft mallets—Malletech LS10’s specifically. He feels these mallets allow him more flexibility in terms of motion and sound manipulation. They also aid in his creative process: “Usually I’m doing almost all my composition with light mallets, because I can feel always [that] I can open new doors. I can feel very good, and also feel light. This is what I’m looking for all the time...”¹¹ When learning a new piece, his first step is to analyze the musical structure, and then to make initial decisions about sticking and positions, all away from the instrument. He then takes a portion of the piece, perhaps a page or two, and does a first read-through to confirm or adjust the decisions he made during the first step. After this, he goes back and practices the material in a more detailed manner, fixing technical issues in a very light way, while playing very softly and slowly. He compares his practicing to Tai Chi, moving in slow conscious motion to understand the *timing* of the movement between positions, synchronizing both the horizontal shifting of each hand as well as the changing of intervals in each hand, so that the transition from one position to the next is a smooth continuous flow of motion. As he becomes more comfortable, the tempo is increased. Once he feels secure with the entire piece at tempo, he switches to heavier performance mallets (frequently his signature line).

*Very light, and I'm fixing all problems—anticipation, positions—but in a very light way, very soft. And then, when I feel okay with the tempo and all, I take the concert mallets, and then... I feel bigger. I don't play so much more, but I play with more amplitude to have more sound, to be in phase with the mallets—just more amplitude. More energy, but no more force.*¹²

So, when playing with his heavier mallets, he makes larger motions (plays with “more amplitude”) but does not play any harder, thus retaining the light touch he developed through his preparation process,

⁹ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

¹⁰ Malletech website (<https://www.mostlymarimba.com/mallets/search-by-series/artist-series/eric-sammut-series.html>) accessed 6/24, 1:30pm

¹¹ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 2.”

¹² Ibid.

while achieving a concert-appropriate volume simply by letting the mallets do the work: “The mallets are doing their job and we just control the rebound, and just influence a little, for the interpretation.”¹³

Rebound, Rhythmic Timing, and Accent Exercises

In order to develop this sense of *rebound*, and to strengthen one’s sense of rhythmic timing, Sammut recommends a series of simple exercises that once again utilize Double Vertical, Single Independent, and Single Alternating strokes. Played at a faster tempo than the preceding exercises, they consist of a sharp forte accent followed by a series of piano strokes. The hands alternate back and forth, and the number of rebound strokes is gradually reduced. Instead of hanging at the side, the unused hand slowly prepares for the next burst of notes, in a slow motion resembling the individual strokes of the first exercises. In this way, each burst of strokes is felt as one larger motion containing the smaller motions within it. The key to this exercise is to focus more on the *unused* / preparing hand, while the active hand plays the rebounds ‘on its own.’ This allows one to feel the time between each successive group of strokes. Feeling the time physically, rather than thinking it, strengthens one’s internal pulse. Sammut points out that variations of these exercises can be applied to snare drum, timpani, etc.

Example 3.3: Double Vertical Rebound Exercises¹⁴

$\text{♩} = 76$
Exercise 2A (Utilizing Single Independent Strokes)

¹³ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

¹⁴ Sammut, “Four Steps to Feel Well at the Marimba.”

Example 3.4: Single Independent Rebound Exercises

♩ = 76
Exercise 2B (Utilizing Single Independent Strokes)

f p (Rebound) ——— *f p* (Rebound) ——— Etc.

Example 3.5: Single Alternating Rebound Exercises

♩ = 76
Exercise 2C (Utilizing Single Alternating Strokes)

f p (Rebound) ——— *f p* (Rebound) ——— Etc.

Sammut also uses accent patterns to even out rotational strokes, allowing one to find “a natural balance in the movement.”¹⁵ For instance, with repetitive single alternating strokes in one hand, accents are applied to every fifth note, forcing the player to keep a smooth flow of motion while emphasizing first one mallet, and then the other in succession, rather than over-emphasizing one side or the other. This effect can also be achieved by applying various rhythms in odd-numbered groups, again forcing the accent to alternate between each mallet.

¹⁵ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

Example 3.6: Alternating Accent Exercises¹⁶

$\text{♩} = 76$

Exercise 3A (Odd-grouped Accents)

Exercise 3B (Odd-grouped Rhythms)

The accents are played with a subtle arm motion in conjunction with the wrist rotation, rather than simply through tension. There should be an elegant flow as the accents move back and forth. Sammut points out that these exercises, and particularly 3A, help to develop a smooth independent (one-handed) roll. Play the exercise at a faster tempo, and when this is working smoothly, with an even rotation and relaxed arm involvement, remove the accents but keep the motion intact. This leads to a full, relaxed independent roll sound. Rolls, independent or otherwise, especially in the lower range of the instrument, do not need to be too fast—allow the bars to resonate fully. As Sammut says, when rolls are too fast, the result is “more attack, but less sound.”¹⁷

Developing the Ears and the Eyes

Technique Applied to Chords

The exercises presented thus far have involved static interval blocks in each hand (usually perfect fifths although the exercises should be applied to various intervals). A first step in beginning to learn about harmony is to take any technical exercise, whether one of the above or any other basic stroke combination or permutation as can be found in books like *Method of Movement*, Kevin Bobo’s *Permutations for the Advanced Marimbist*, et cetera, and apply it to a specific chord rather than a static block. This chord can then be transposed up and down the keyboard chromatically, or by larger intervals such as major seconds, which forces the player to find a variety of positions for the mallets / hands / elbows. Sammut typically uses seventh chords in his exercises, which are built using the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of their respective scales / modes. The chord tones can be spaced differently and inverted to

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

generate many configurations. The five most basic seventh chords are the major (maj7), dominant (7), minor (m7), half diminished (m7b5), and fully diminished (dim7) seventh chords.

Example 3.7: Seventh Chords and Inversions

Seventh chords work well when applied to marimba exercises because the marimbist generally holds four mallets, and seventh chords are constructed with four pitches, so each voice in the chord is assigned to a mallet. In the following example, the basic sticking pattern (permutation) 1-3-2-4 is applied to a major seventh chord and transposed up chromatically and by major seconds, using a chord voicing of 1-5-7-3. Sammut typically uses this voicing when demonstrating exercises involving seventh chords.

Example 3.8: Permutation and Transposition

There is a “double benefit” of practicing technique this way in that “by this way of technical practice, your ear is practicing as well.”¹⁸ This exercise can be utilized to familiarize oneself with the feel and sound of all seventh chords, as well as other harmonic structures. This exercise and the following material are strong examples of how one can begin the process of unifying technique and theory as discussed above.

Harmonic Planing and Anticipation

Another powerful tool for learning harmony, and especially for getting comfortable and familiar with different keys on the marimba, is known as harmonic planing. Planing is essentially diatonic transposition—meaning, one starts with a chord or other structure as before, but thinks in terms of key signature or scale, so instead of transposing the chord exactly, the shape is moved up and down *within a particular key*. For example, planing the major seventh chord from the preceding exercise in the key of D Major would look like the following example. Chord symbol and function are included.

Example 3.9: Harmonic Planing¹⁹

Exercise 5A: Harmonic Planing

Several important concepts can be explored through this process. Not only does this help one to “see” a particular key or scale more clearly on the instrument, but also it allows one to hear and become familiar with all diatonic harmonies within that key. Notice that four of the five ‘basic seventh chords’ are present in a major key: major sevenths on I and IV, minor sevenths on II, III, and VI, a dominant seventh on V, and a half diminished seventh on VII. Of course, various permutations and exercises can be applied to this process. The 1-3-2-4 permutation could be applied as follows:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Example 3.10: Harmonic Planing with Permutation

Exercise 5B: Harmonic Planing with 1-3-2-4 Permutation

I II III IV V VI VII I

Éric Sammut uses this tool extensively to work on technique and to develop what he calls *anticipation*. Essentially, anticipation is the ability of the player to see, feel, and hear ahead of where they are in real-time. Motion on the marimba involves the whole body—hands, arms, upper body, even the legs—and smooth control of all of this requires knowledge of exactly when and how to move so there is no hesitation. Sammut considers this an essential aspect of playing the marimba.

*Anticipation is very important for the instrument. We have to move... very fast, we have to prepare all the time where we have to move the legs, etc.*²⁰

*Anticipation is one of the more important key[s] to play[ing] this instrument, because we have to deal with positions, to go from the low to the high[, etc.] ...*²¹

For this reason, Sammut requires that his students apply the planing concept to their technical practice. In lessons, Sammut often invents patterns on the spot, which the students then plane up and down a given key. Sammut advises that they loop each pattern in each position until they are sure of where to move next, and only when they are sure should they shift the pattern up or down within the key. The patterns can be simple permutations as in the above example, or they can be much more complex, involving a larger range, rhythmic and dynamic variety, etc. During his clinic at PASIC 2005, Sammut referred to these as “Rhythm and Harmony” exercises.²² Below is a sample of some of the patterns Sammut invented during the teaching of two lessons during December of 2014, which were applied to the F Dorian scale (Eb major beginning on F).²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

²² Sammut, “Four Steps to Feel Well at the Marimba.”

²³ Éric Sammut, “Lesson Observation,” observation by author, Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris, December 5, 2014.

Example 3.11: Rhythm and Harmony Exercises

The image displays four staves of musical notation for piano, arranged in a system. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The exercises are as follows:
Staff 1: Right hand plays a simple eighth-note melody (B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat). Left hand plays a bass line (B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat).
Staff 2: Right hand plays a more complex melody with slurs and ties. Left hand plays a bass line with eighth notes and slurs.
Staff 3: Right hand features a triplet of eighth notes (B-flat, A, G) followed by a melody. Left hand plays a bass line with triplets of eighth notes.
Staff 4: Right hand plays a continuous eighth-note melody. Left hand plays a bass line with eighth notes.

The possibilities for this concept are endless. Sammut recommends inventing one's own exercises combining various strokes, patterns, and techniques, and applying them to different keys. Over time, this process allows the marimbist to navigate up and down any scale comfortably. Éric Sammut's suggestion to create original Rhythm and Harmony exercises echoes the advice printed at the bottom of nearly every page of Gordon Stout's *Ideo-Kinetics* workbook: "MAKE UP YOUR OWN!"²⁴

Distance Control and Global Vision

Playing the marimba accurately is particularly challenging for two reasons: 1) it is so large that it cannot be clearly seen in its entirety from the performer's perspective; 2) the performer's physical connection to the instrument is limited to the moment of contact when a bar is struck, producing a sound. For these reasons, a marimba performer must develop a kinesthetic awareness of the instrument that involves learning to feel the distances between notes through motion, using visual cues merely as guides, rather than relying either on an exclusively kinesthetic approach (playing with the eyes shut), or a strictly

²⁴ Stout, "Ideo-Kinetics: A Workbook for Marimba Technique."


visual approach (looking at each note as it is played). Stout's ideo-kinetic exercises are based on this principal, requiring the performer to fix their eyes on a particular bar of the marimba while slowly and gradually playing notes that are further and further removed from the focal point. For a detailed account of the relationship between visual and kinesthetic perception, and in particular the inaccuracy that results from using these modes of perception inconsistently, see Joseph C. Combs, "The Problems of Sight-Reading on Mallet-Played Instruments and Their Relationship to Kinesthetic Sensation."²⁵

Éric Sammut has developed a simple exercise that strengthens his kinesthetic awareness while allowing him to keep his eyes above the marimba, enabling him to "see" the entire instrument through peripheral vision, or what he terms *global vision*. He places a blank music stand in a central location in front of the instrument, as if he was going to read music. He then chooses a key and slowly oscillates back and forth between the I chord in a lower register and the same exact chord either one or two octaves higher, while *keeping his eyes fixed on the music stand*. In this way, he can only see the marimba indirectly, forcing him to find the upper and lower notes by feel—with this indirect, "global" vision as an aid—rather than through direct eye contact with the bars. When the I chord is comfortable he then, without shifting his vision away from the music stand, planes the initial chord up to the next position in the key and repeats the exercise, gradually working up the instrument. The key point is that the kinesthetic and visual information interact in a specific way during this exercise—looking down to find the chords eliminates the possibility of learning this skill.

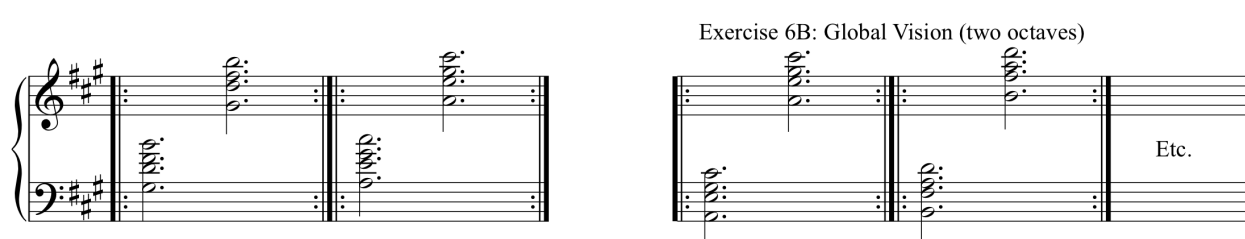
²⁵ Joseph C. Combs, "The Problems of Sight-Reading on Mallet-Played Instruments and Their Relationship to Kinesthetic Sensation," (DME diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1967).

Example 3.12: Global Vision and Distance Control²⁶

$\text{♩} = 120$
Exercise 6A: Global Vision (one octave)



Exercise 6B: Global Vision (two octaves)



One important benefit to playing this exercise in its entirety (planing the chord through all seven positions in the key) is it forces the player to “see” the shape of an entire scale and key through “global vision,” so that when reading or improvising in particular keys, the diatonic harmonies and other shapes will be seen and felt clearly. It is important to keep in mind that there are several crucial details that must be followed for this exercise to achieve its intended purpose. First, the tempo is very slow. The motion between each chord should be continuous, and as smooth and slow as possible. This includes the subtle change of interval in each hand, due to the bars being wide in the lower range and narrow in the upper range. Also, the whole body plays a role in this exercise—hands, arms, torso, and even the legs. The two-octave variation especially requires good balance and the ability to subtly lean to the left and the right without losing one’s kinesthetic connection to the instrument. This relates back to Sammut’s Tai Chi analogy: as Tai Chi instructor Chris Pei notes in the introduction to his *Tai Chi for Beginners* DVD,

Tai Chi is [continuous movement]. And I find, through my teaching experience, most people see the beginning and the ending posture, but they sometimes get confused or totally ignore the process between the beginning and the ending. What [is] most important is the process, so I teach the moves very mechanically²⁷ in the beginning to

²⁶ Sammut, “Four Steps to Feel Well at the Marimba.”

²⁷ It is worth noting, Pei’s “very mechanical” teaching simply involves moving only certain parts of the body at once when learning a new move. For instance, to practice moving into a new position or ‘frame,’ he will ask the student to first move one arm, and then another, followed by shifting the body weight and finally taking a slow step. After this has been repeated, the moves are put together so that the four separate motions

*show everyone that this is the timing point where your hands and feet [have] to reach at the same time... After you memorize the timing point, then we'll begin to move smoother.*²⁸

The goal is not merely to hit the notes, but to learn, physically, the *distance to the notes*, which can only be accomplished by feeling the space and learning the timing of the motions, so that all four mallets arrive at each position at the same time. When the body understands the distance in this depth, an increase in tempo will pose no problem—the speed at which one moves increases, but the distance does not change.

As Sammut explains,

*All is understood by [the] body—not only with the eyes, or even the brain. It's all in the body.*²⁹

*...step by step, we can learn the distance, and then when your body knows the distance... [then] if the tempo is faster, you will do it. It's like mathematics—it's a proportion.*³⁰

*[W]hen you practice really [slow] like this, [and] then you change the speed, it's just the report [that] is different, but the distance is the same.*³¹

This is how Éric Sammut practices most of the time, whether he is practicing exercises or marimba repertoire. He is always “practicing the timing” and “learning about space.” He acknowledges many benefits to this type of awareness, including an increased comfort with sight-reading, and the ability to more easily transition between various brands of marimba. He also points out that, through the application of “global vision,”

*The energy you don't use with the eyes, you use for the music, and to be in phase with [the] acoustic, and new events... [I]f you spend too much energy to have a look on the bars, to focus I mean—then you miss energy for listening, and you will lose maybe 20% of your ability to play for an event, examination, [etc.]*³²

Finally, the freedom Sammut achieves through this process inspires his creativity. Because he knows the marimba on such a kinesthetic level, he is free to explore the whole instrument. “I will find a pattern naturally, because I know the distance.” Without this flexibility, “...it's difficult to be inspired to have

become one continuous flow. There is nothing ‘mechanical’ about the individual motions themselves, but only in how they are gradually learned and combined.

²⁸ Chris Pei and Michael Wohl, *Tai Chi for Beginners*, DVD video, ([U.S.?]: BodyWisdom Media, 2011).

²⁹ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

³⁰ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

³¹ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

³² Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

contrast.”³³ Knowing the instrument physically opens up many possibilities in terms of composition, arranging, and improvisation.

One final note on how this material applies to solo performance: during a recital, Sammut usually looks at the keyboard, but not in a focused way. Although he points his gaze toward the instrument, he is still able to employ “global vision” to see the instrument indirectly, using his well-developed feel to play accurately. His decision to look toward the instrument is more of an aesthetic than a musical or technical choice, as he jokes,

*When I play [a] recital, when you have people here [directly in front of you], you cannot have a look on the people all the time. They will [be uncomfortable]—What does he want? What does he want??? So I just fix my vision on the marimba, but not very accurately, not too strong, just because I have to get my eyes somewhere—but indeed I can see [the whole] instrument.*³⁴

Transposition

The importance of transposition to the improvising musician cannot be overstated. Improvisation requires an understanding of the underlying structure of the music in question, and transposition forces the player to understand music in terms of structure, rather than simply thinking of the surface, or the ‘notes.’ In his dissertation on jazz vibraphone pedagogy, Brian McNulty recommends that beginning jazz students start practicing transposition early in their education, because “[t]ransposition is an indispensable tool for the jazz musician. Not only will jazz musicians play certain tunes in different keys, but the practice of transposition will aid in technical facility and force the student to think analytically about what they are playing.”³⁵ Éric Sammut believes that transposition is “one of the best ways to structure your brain,”³⁶ and is also an excellent tool for strengthening anticipation. His first experience with transposition was when he was a child, at the end of his first year of piano study. He was given two months to learn his examination piece, but after ten days, he knew it. A combination of curiosity and

³³ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Brian McNulty, “Jazz Vibraphone Pedagogy: A Survey of Existing Method Books and a Proposed Undergraduate Curriculum,” (DM diss., Indiana University, 2013): 46–47.

³⁶ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

boredom lead him to try playing the piece in another key. “I decided to try to do transposition, just like a game. It was my first idea... trying to do the same, but differently.”³⁷ From this early experience he began learning to play familiar pieces and songs by ear, a practice he continues to this day.

Sammut recommends practicing transposition with simple material. He especially recommends simple pops songs, and points out that for the most part, transposing marimba repertoire is more difficult. In a clinic in 2014 he demonstrated transposition with the opening four bars of the Sarabande from Bach’s Cello Suite in C Major, shown here:

Example 3.13: J. S. Bach, *Sarabande* from *Suite No. 3*, mm. 1–4 (as played by Éric Sammut)



These measures begin with an open position C Major chord in the lowest register of the marimba. The upper voice then descends over simple harmonies, arriving at a C/E triad (I⁶) on the downbeat of measure five. Sammut first played this excerpt in the original key, and then transposed it up a whole step to D Major. He shed some light on his thought process:

...in C major, you have, [plays one octave C Major scale] and [when] you do in D, [plays one octave D Major scale]—so you have two sharps in the key, so you just think about two sharps. [Plays the four-measure excerpt in D Major.] And, when you [are] working with chords, you just need to transpose. So, [tonic,] fifth, third, and tonic. [He then takes the opening C Major chord voiced as 1-5-3-1 and transposes it up in whole steps to D Major, E Major, F# Major, Ab Major, Bb Major, and finally to C Major an octave higher.]³⁸

Sammut’s commentary highlights two important points. First, the transposition of the opening chord demonstrates the benefits of practicing technique in this way, as discussed above. He is able to “see” and “hear” the chord in any position on the keyboard, moving it around as a single unit—a particular shape within a key—rather than trying to transpose each individual voice by a specified interval one at a time, or measuring the interval between each chord tone, again building the chord one voice at a time. The

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

second important point is his comment, “you just think about two sharps.” Thinking about two sharps implies “seeing” the shape of the scale clearly, in fact as clearly as one can see a C Major scale, so that as the voices begin to move up and down within the key, Sammut can simply let his knowledge of the music and the voice leading play out in this key rather than another. His ears and eyes guide him: he is more concerned with the construction and motion of the voices than of playing any particular ordering of pitches.

It becomes apparent that all of the preceding exercises, the transposition of chords and the planing of various voicings and exercises, gradually builds (as Sammut would say, “step by step”) toward the ability to place familiar music in another key in an intuitive and aural rather than an intellectual way. Sammut points out that at the beginning this process feels difficult. At first, one might feel strained, but over time the process of transposition will smooth out as connections between the hands, the eyes, and the ears become stronger. “It’s like a computer, [right]? Not so much—for the beginning, yeah, [but] then after [a while], the ear is doing [it].”³⁹

Rhythmic Independence: Separation of the Hands

*We can control both—we can control by [mixing] right and left. We can really feel right and left together. And also, we can feel [the hands] separate[ly] ... Two controls [are] possible.*⁴⁰

Éric Sammut’s marimba playing features a great deal of independence. He can easily shift between a unified control, where the left and right hands work together to express one musical idea, to completely separate control, where the left and right hands operate in complete rhythmic and dynamic independence. As he points out, two controls are possible. As stepping-stones toward rhythmic freedom, he has developed polymetric and polyrhythmic exercises that help to not only coordinate the hands, but also direct the player’s listening and awareness toward one hand or the other.

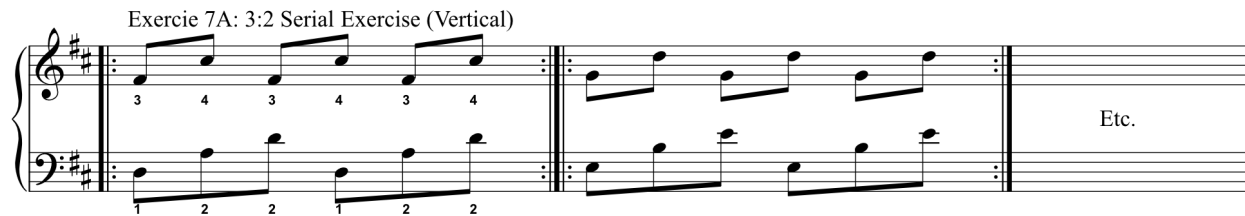
³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

Polymetric Exercises

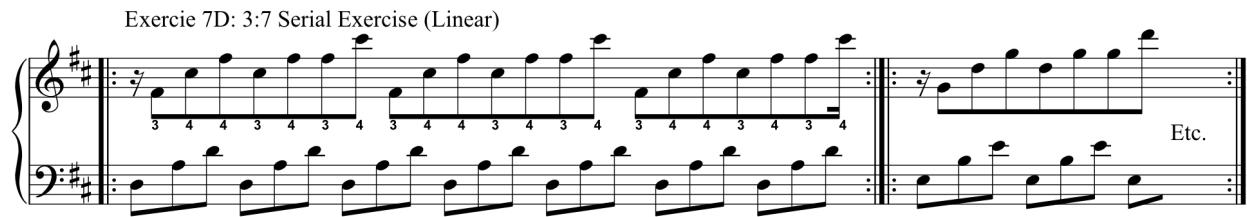
Polymeter implies two (or more) meters existing simultaneously within the same rhythmic subdivision. Sammut refers to these exercises as *serial exercises*, because one hand repeats a series of x notes while the other repeats a series of y notes. When x has repeated y times (or vice versa) the patterns converge. For instance, the simplest exercise involves a series of three in the left and two on the right:

Example 3.14: 3:2 Serial Exercise (Vertical)⁴¹



A final example involves a series of three notes in the left against seven in the right, again shown in a linear texture.

Example 3.17: 3:7 Serial Exercise (Linear)



One could conceivably create endless varieties of similar exercises by combining different chord voicings, stickings, etc. Sammut emphasizes that these exercises are “good for listening—to learn to separate the listening of right and left.”⁴² He recommends creating a “special listening” of, for example, 60% on the left and 40% on the right,⁴³ to ensure that the hands are perceived as separate in the player’s ear / mind rather than combined into one sensation. The ability to not only physically play the exercises, but to smoothly shift one’s attention and focus to one side or the other, opens up many musical possibilities. Sammut considers these polymetric exercises to fall between a unified mixture of the two hands on one extreme, and total independence on the other.

Polyrhythmic Exercises

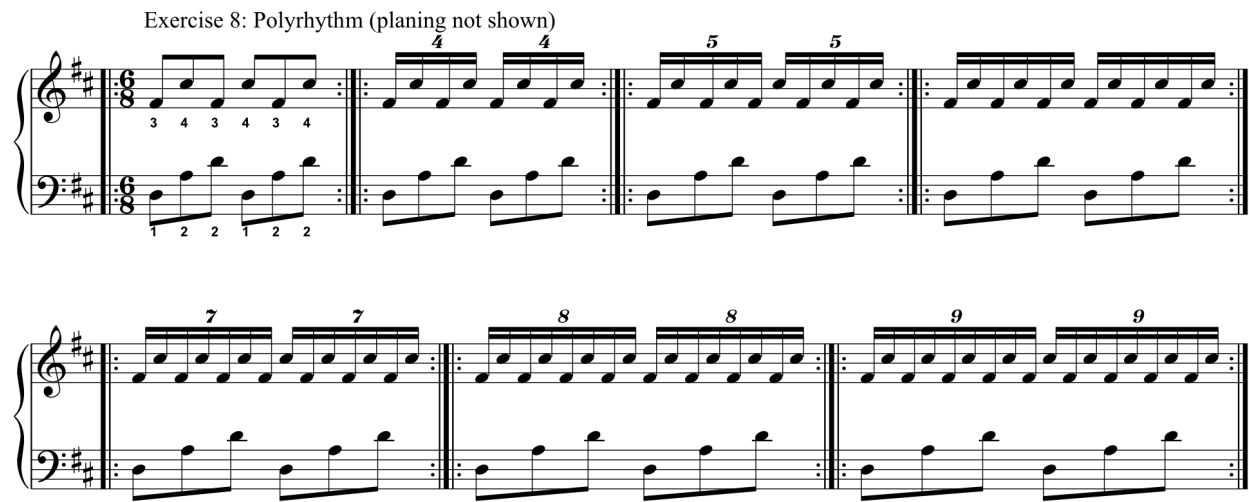
To take hand independence a step further, Sammut uses a similarly simple and powerful series of exercises to develop polyrhythm. Once again, the left hand plays a simple 1-2-2 ostinato while the right hand alternates back and forth, dividing the beat into smaller and smaller subdivisions. Each individual measure of the following example can be played up a given key, or one can simply progress through the subdivisions, staying on the same chord the whole time, as shown below.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sammut, “Four Steps to Feel Well at the Marimba.”

Example 3.18: Polyrhythmic Exercises⁴⁴

Exercise 8: Polyrhythm (planing not shown)



Two points need to be highlighted: again, the ability to listen to one side or the other, hearing and feeling the hands as separate entities, is important. Also, Sammut recommends that, although these exercises are very rhythmic in nature, they should be done “in a relaxed way, and maybe with some softer mallets to have more resonance. It must be more like *sound*—not too rhythmical... More like chords.”⁴⁵ With this exercise, Sammut is more concerned with the total harmonic effect of the texture than with the interplay between the rhythms. The musical freedom gained over time through this method is more important than simply playing polyrhythms for polyrhythms’ sake.

As a brief example of the end result of these technical exercises, see the following four-measure excerpt from Sammut’s solo marimba arrangement of Joseph Colombo’s *Indifference*, which features an improvisatory right hand over a rhythmically stable left hand accompaniment.

Example 3.19: Éric Sammut, *Indifference*, mm. 61–64⁴⁶

like improvisation



⁴⁴ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁴⁵ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

⁴⁶ *Indifference* by Éric Sammut: mm. 61–64. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

This passage represents a rare instance where Sammut uses fanning beams to indicate an improvisatory, contrametric texture, and he in fact improvises during this section in performance. The right hand is rhythmically free, and the phrases, indicated by slur marks, are of different lengths. Sammut's freedom, as developed through his polymetric and polyrhythmic exercises, allows him to perform music such as this in a fluid, natural way. His focus is on the melodic and harmonic flow of the music, rather than the rhythmic intricacies inherent in such a texture.

Contrapuntal Independence: Separation of the Voices

Two-Part Independence Exercises

As was seen in the previous examples, independence involves more than simply the ability to play polyrhythms in a robotic fashion. Ultimately, one should achieve not only rhythmic, but *musical* separation, meaning the hands should be independent in terms of phrasing and dynamics, and overall flow. In this way, it becomes possible to play two truly independent voices simultaneously. Sammut's approach to working on the two-part inventions of J. S. Bach further develops this concept. Take the opening measures of the Two Part Invention in C Major, for example:

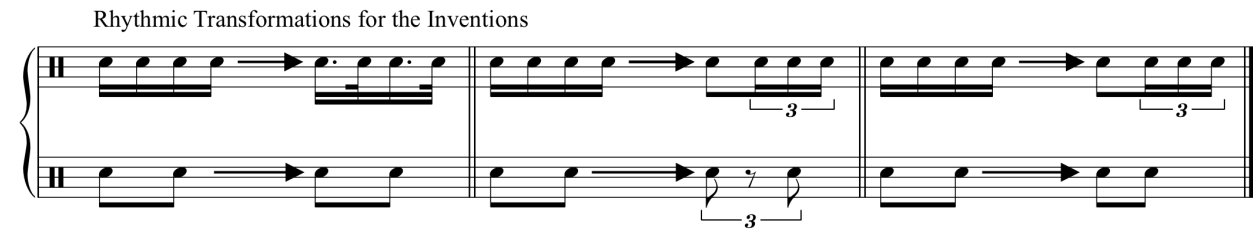
Example 3.20: J. S. Bach, *Invention No. 1*, mm. 1–4

Two-Part Invention in C Major (Bach)

While the music is obviously made up of two separate musical lines, it is tempting to perform it as a long series of *vertical* events rather than feeling it as two concurrent *horizontal* statements. In this way, the two parts become combined in the player's body and ears. Sammut considers this combination to be a

form of “cheating.”⁴⁷ The voices must be controlled separately for a truly polyphonic music to be attained. An exercise Sammut uses in his own practicing and teaching is to apply simple rhythmic transformations to the inventions to force the player to hear and feel the lines in different ways. Three common scenarios are shown below:

Example 3.21: Three Rhythmic Transformations⁴⁸



The first example involves essentially “swinging” the sixteenth notes and keeping the other rhythms intact. The second involves converting each group of four sixteenths into an eighth note followed by three sextuplets, while converting each pair of eighth notes into the first and last partials of eighth-note triplets. In both of these cases, the actual vertical alignment of the parts remains as written, but the second takes on a triple, rather than a duple, feel. The most challenging of all is the third example, where the sixteenths are converted to the eighth-to-sextuplet rhythm, while the eighth notes remain unchanged. In this case, the actual alignment of the parts changes, because the second eighth note, which normally falls with the third note of a group of four sixteenths, in this case falls with the *second* note of the group. This breaks away from any automatic vertical alignment, forcing the player to be more aware of each musical line separately. The following examples show how these rhythmic transformations can be applied to the Invention example above:

⁴⁷ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 2.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Example 3.22: Application of First Transformation

Transformation #1: "Swung" sixteenths

The musical score for Example 3.22 is written in 2/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The second system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The score ends with a double bar line and the word "Etc."

Example 3.23: Application of Second Transformation

Transformation #2: Sextuplets and Eighth-note Triplets

The musical score for Example 3.23 is written in 2/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The second system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The score ends with a double bar line and the word "Etc."

Example 3.24: Application of Third Transformation

Transformation #3: Sextuplets and Straight Eighths

The musical score for Example 3.24 is written in 2/4 time. It consists of two systems. The first system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The second system has two measures. The first measure contains a treble staff with a sixteenth-note triplet (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5), and a bass staff with a half rest followed by a sixteenth-note triplet (G3, F3, E3) followed by a quarter note (D3). The second measure contains a treble staff with a quarter note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a quarter note (A4), and a bass staff with a quarter note (D3), a quarter note (C3), and a quarter note (B2). The score ends with a double bar line and the word "Etc."

As a way of putting everything back together, Sammut uses what will be referred to as a *burst exercise*, meaning a certain amount of the music—either a half measure, whole measure, or some other configuration—is played at performance tempo in a quick ‘burst,’ followed by a rest of the same length. After the rest, the music is picked up where it was left off and the next burst is played. There is overlap between each burst: in other words, in a half-measure burst exercise, beats one and two are played, stopping on beat three; the next burst starts on beat three and ends on the downbeat of the next measure. The following illustrates this exercise, again applied to the Invention in C Major:

Example 3.25: Burst Exercise applied to J. S. Bach, *Invention No. 1*

Burst Exercise in half-measures

This is an effective method of breaking down the music into small chunks, giving the player time to self-analyze and smooth out the execution of the parts.

Linear Counterpoint

The two-part inventions of Bach can easily be ‘mapped’ onto the hands by assigning the treble staff to the right hand, and the bass staff to the left hand. Quite often, however, musical lines and musical function are not so obvious. Unlike the polyphonic texture of the Bach inventions, where two parts are stacked on top of and literally sound against one another, in a linear texture only one note is sounded at a time. This texture is very marimba-friendly due to the resonant nature of the instrument. The realization of multiple voices within a linear texture is often referred to as compound melody, but will be referred to here as *linear counterpoint*. Sammut’s music and improvisations make frequent use of linear textures,

and so an understanding of linear counterpoint is necessary to grasping the bigger picture of his approach to making music. Sammut stresses the importance of understanding this concept:

It's important to have a polyphonic approach, you know, counterpoint. Counterpoint is very important... [I]t gives you the opportunity to play your [version of the] music, even if you play the same [piece as someone else]. You have a choice, OK? Don't play [as a block]—just choose the notes you like to hear. It's very important for the construction of the music.⁴⁹

For examples of linear counterpoint, Sammut turns to the Cello Suites of J. S. Bach. Because they are written for solo cello, they feature a predominantly linear texture. A clear example of the possible variety in counterpoint can be seen in the opening measures to the Prelude in G Major from the First Suite. One can play this music flatly—in other words, it can be treated as one long melody. However, this approach overlooks the essentially polyphonic nature of this linear music. Another common approach is to bring out the obvious ‘first choice’ for the melody—the uppermost line. The music would be realized as shown in the following example. Large-scale beaming is used to highlight the musical line that is brought out dynamically.

Example 3.26: J. S. Bach, *Prelude from Suite No. 1*, mm. 1–5 (emphasized top voice)



Sammut prefers a different take on these opening measures. He brings out a rising inner voice rather than the more static top line:

⁴⁹ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

Example 3.27: J. S. Bach, *Prelude from Suite No. 1*, mm. 1–5 (emphasized inner voice)



Both versions are valid and simply highlight different aspects of the passage. The selection of notes to bring out is never arbitrary—as Sammut points out, this should be rooted in “the construction of the music.”

A more involved example comes from the Prelude in C Major from the Third Suite. Rather than bringing one voice out of the texture, Sammut brings out two voices. In the following example, the notes beamed from above indicate the upper voice, and the notes beamed from below indicate the lower voice. In both cases, these correspond to the notes Sammut brings to the foreground in performance.

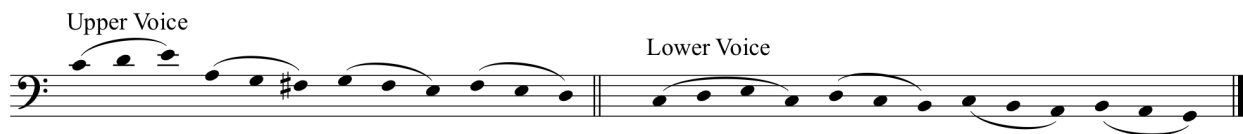
Example 3.28: J. S. Bach, *Prelude from Suite No. 3*, mm. 1–12 (two-voice linear counterpoint)⁵⁰



⁵⁰ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 2.”

Sammut's performance of this passage serves as an analysis. The two voices are established in the first measure. A rising third from C-D-E is highlighted in the lower voice in the first four measures, followed by the same gesture in the upper voice, picked up as a high D in measure five, arriving on E on the downbeat of measure six. This establishes a motive of a rising third in both voices, which is promptly inverted and stated as a series of echoed descents in a modulatory passage, beginning with the top voice in measure seven on A-G-F#, and ending with the lower voice on B-A-G, with a final resolution to the dominant (G). When the voices are isolated, they make musical and motivic sense:

Example 3.29: Voices Extracted from the Prelude in C



Thus, Sammut's performance of this passage sheds light on some of the compositional nuances inherent in the work. Rather than playing the music as one long melody, he makes use of the concept of linear counterpoint to produce a rich, contrapuntally informed presentation.

A final example will demonstrate how this concept can provide variety in a performance.

Sammut points out that, in a repeated passage, the "repeat can be different counterpoint... The second time could be very different."⁵¹ As an example, he chooses the opening measures of the Bourrée from the Third Cello Suite. The following example shows his interpretation of the counterpoint during the first and second repetitions, shown side-by-side to make the distinction clear.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Example 3.30: J. S. Bach, *Bourée I* from *Suite No. 3*, mm. 1–8 (counterpoint options)⁵²



Each repetition makes a different impression, bringing out different aspects of the music, as can be seen clearly when the highlighted voice is isolated as before:

Example 3.31: *Bourrée* Counterpoint Extraction



Sammut is able to find different musical ‘paths’ through the notes. The music is never one-dimensional. He takes his own advice seriously: “Respect the counterpoint.”⁵³ This concept, which Sammut clearly demonstrates through his performances of the music of J. S. Bach, enables a much deeper understanding of his original music, as well as his improvisations. He is always aware of multiple musical functions, as will be explored in the next segment.

Three-Dimensional Music

In Sammut’s music, there are typically three musical functions happening at all times: a bass line (or bass notes); a melodic line; and chordal (or accompanimental) material. Understanding and balancing these three musical functions (or dimensions) is essential to conveying the true message behind the notes.

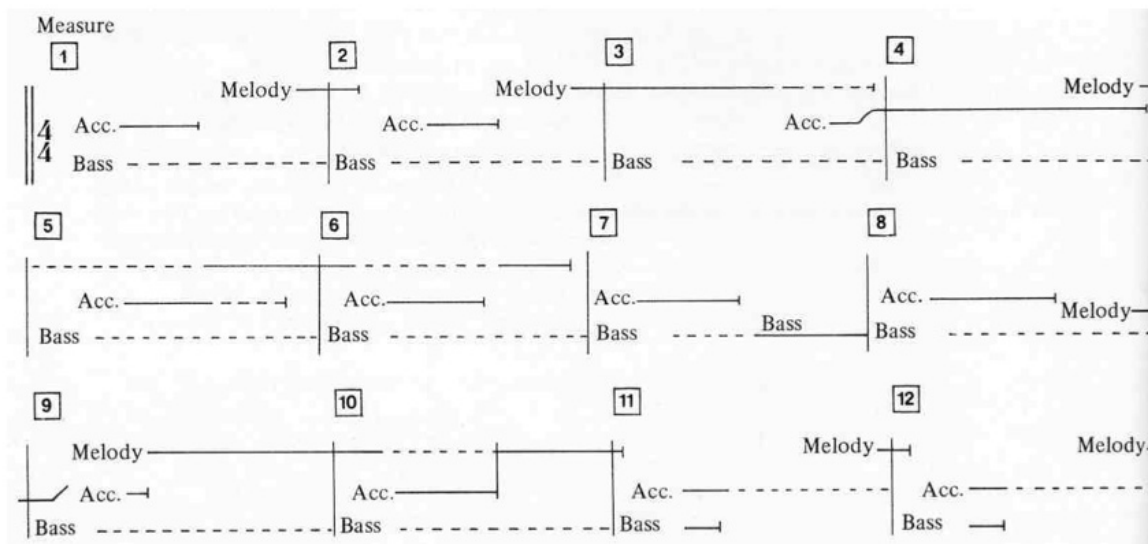
⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

As Sammut relates, “You have three dimensions, not one... [this] is very important... you have bass, you have chords, and you have melody—don't play in a block... Try to separate the control.”⁵⁴ Ralph Towner utilizes a nearly identical concept in his solo guitar improvisations. In his book *Improvisation and Performance Techniques for Classical and Acoustic Guitar*, he presents this three-dimensional approach very clearly in the form of a graph, where he analyzes a transcription of his own solo improvisation in terms of function (melody, accompaniment, and bass) rather than harmony or scale use. For the musical excerpt in question (referred to below as “Exercise 3”) see pg. 38 of his book. The graph is shown here:

Example 3.32: Towner Musical Function Graph⁵⁵

A measure-by-measure representation of the three functions and their occurrence in Exercise 3



He elaborates this concept:

*The three functions are dealt with solitarily, but often overlap (intentionally). The melody is generally played at a louder volume than the chords to distinguish it from the accompaniment role. When the melody, or what is designated to be in the foreground, descends into the same pitch range as the accompaniment, its identity is dependent upon all the qualities associated with it (i.e., volume, tone colors, articulation, etc.) that were established at the very outset of the piece.*⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

⁵⁵ Towner, 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The dotted lines represent a sustained note. The solid lines represent full activity or focus in a part. So this is a stark example of focusing on only a single part at one time while maintaining the thread of all three. This is not to say that two or even three equally active parts can't be played simultaneously, but rather that it is not aesthetically necessary in order to carry out a multiple-part solo performance. The designated categories of melody, accompaniment, and bass are a strict formalization to help organize your mind. The actual roles and functions of musical material can constantly shift in importance and emphasis and become somewhat slippery to categorize into three distinct parts. But I find this categorization an excellent method with which to achieve multi-dimensional music extemporaneously with less mental confusion. Try to avoid making the shifts from one category to the next too uniformly. (Using the same lengths and order becomes too "blockish" and too predictable.) Take a category and extend it frequently through the bar lines so that the measures don't become symmetrical corrals for the musical events.⁵⁷

As Towner points out, thinking in these terms is “an excellent method with which to achieve multi-dimensional music extemporaneously...” It is a useful improvisatory tool, and bridges the gap between purely melodic improvisation, and the contrapuntal textures of Bach.

Sammut uses an excerpt from his *Caméléon* as an example of this concept in his music. The following example shows mm. 29–34 of *Caméléon* as Sammut demonstrates it. As with the Bach examples, the large-scale beaming indicates the notes that Sammut emphasized in his performance, in this case bringing out the bass and melody lines. The rest of the notes are shown with small note heads to indicate their accompanimental role—as Sammut said, “[the] inside is like chords.”⁵⁸ In the score, Sammut marks the beamed notes with tenuto marks. The beaming is used here to emphasize the horizontal aspect of the voices.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁸ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

Example 3.33: Éric Sammut, *Caméléon*, mm. 29–34 (Polyphonic Approach)⁵⁹



When this excerpt is performed as indicated, there is a three-dimensional effect: there is counterpoint between the upper line and the bass, with the harmony being filled in and elaborated through the inner notes. Mallet one is responsible for the bass line; mallet four is responsible for the melody; both hands are involved in realizing the chordal material. Playing this music “in a block”—i.e., treating it as one long melody rather than three separate concurrent ideas—eliminates this three-dimensional impression.

Final Words

The present chapter has covered a lot of information. Sammut’s approach to making music on the marimba has been explored in depth from the ground up, beginning with his physical demeanor, sound, technique, exploration of harmony, visual and kinesthetic awareness, as well as his physical and musical independence. All of this information remains relevant as specifically improvisational exercises and examples are explored in the next chapter.

⁵⁹ *Cameleon* by Éric Sammut: mm. 29–34. ©2009 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Chapter 4: Improvisational Tools

The previous chapter discussed Sammut's approach to playing the marimba from a non-improvisatory perspective. Now, his improvisation-specific concepts will be explored, gradually moving away from a technically-driven attitude, as the focus shifts toward further understanding the musical potential of individual scales and simple harmonic structures. Specific techniques for prolonging and sustaining harmonies will emerge, followed by examples of how to balance the various musical functions and practice the techniques. A survey of representative examples from Sammut's music follows, with a close look at Sammut's approach to *variation* concluding the chapter.

Primary Improvisational Tools

*[With] just one scale, you can do a lot of things...¹
With just one scale, we can play ten minutes, and [the music will not be] boring.²
—Éric Sammut*

The above quote is a reminder that it is worth spending time exploring individual scales / keys in depth. As was seen in the previous chapter, harmonic planing opens up a world of possibilities in terms of technical and aural development, and harmonic understanding. Building on this exercise, Sammut presents two simple methods of further exploring diatonic harmonies. The first introduces melodic motion into chordal positions, and the second enables one to traverse harmonies more fluidly through arpeggiation. Along with this comes Sammut's particular manner of combining his left and right hands in a flexible format. When combined with the three-dimensional approach, these techniques provide enough variety to begin improvising spontaneous diatonic music in a satisfying and expressive way.

Melodic Motion and the Pivot Note

Previously, a simple sticking pattern of 1-3-2-4 was applied to basic chords within a key as a means of developing technique within a harmonic context. This idea can be extended by moving one

¹ Sammut, "Seminar Clinic."

² Sammut, "Seminar Interview."

mallet up and down within the scale, allowing it to function as an independent melodic voice. Sammut demonstrates this concept on a simple E minor chord:

Example 4.1: Melodic Motion on One Chord³



In the above example, mallet three of the right hand remains on the E while mallet four traverses the scale. The E in this case functions as what will be referred to as a *pivot note* (marked P.N. above)—as the melody moves up and down, the right hand pivots around this pitch. Sammut makes use of pivot notes frequently in his writing and improvisation. Notice the tenuto markings (rather than large-scale beaming) that show which notes to bring to the foreground: the initial low E in the left hand establishes the bass voice, and the top line moves melodically, while the remaining pitches stay in the background, providing harmonic support to the moving line. Significantly, the pivot note is itself part of the *accompaniment*, so care must be taken to keep this pitch on a lower dynamic level than the melody—the right hand is performing two different roles simultaneously. Even when demonstrating this simple technique, Sammut has a three-dimensional musical picture in his mind. This example is more than merely a triad with a moving voice—it is a complete, albeit simple, musical statement.

Planing the initial chord of the above example (voiced 1-5-1-3) through the given key while still moving the top mallet in a melodic fashion results in simultaneous melodic and harmonic motion. The following example demonstrates this idea over descending harmonies, moving from E minor down to B

³ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

minor (all within the key signature of one sharp). The chord symbols are provided, and the pivot notes are circled. Tenuato markings again show the bass line and melody.

Example 4.2: Melodic Motion with Moving Harmonies⁴

The musical score for Example 4.2 is written in G major (one sharp) and consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. Each system shows a treble and bass staff. Chord symbols are placed above the staves: Em, D, C, Bm, Em in the first system; D in the second; C in the third; and Bm in the fourth. Pivot notes (P.N.) are circled in the treble staff of the first system and in the bass staff of the second, third, and fourth systems. Tenuato markings are present in the bass staff of the first system and in the treble staff of the second, third, and fourth systems.

Immediately one can see the improvisational potential of this technique: it provides a method of combining melody and harmony on the marimba in a very idiomatic way. This should be applied to other sticking patterns, keys, and chord spacings. Additionally, the harmonic motion does not have to proceed in this scalar fashion—if one is familiar enough with the harmonies within the given key, the bass line can move in leaps rather than steps, opening up the possibility for widely varied diatonic harmonic progressions. One could also experiment with moving a different voice / mallet. For instance, mallet three (the alto voice) could move up and down, with the top voice functioning as the pivot note. Wider chord spacings would give the inner voices more room to maneuver.

⁴ Ibid.

Left-hand Positions

In the above examples, the left hand remains on the first and fifth tones of each chord, rotating back and forth between the two pitches as a means of sustaining the harmony. This simple fact introduces an extremely important facet of Sammut's music, which will be referred to here as a *left-hand position*, or LP for short. On a piano, the left hand can simply sustain a chord underneath right-hand melodies, but because of the short sustain of the marimba, harmony can only be audibly sustained on this instrument through the repetition of notes. The LP provides a tool for achieving this effect. Because the left hand rotates back and forth between chord tones one and five, the above example will be said to incorporate a [1,5]LP. The square brackets are used here to identify the *rotation interval*: the pair of notes that are sustained through this perpetual repetition to keep the harmony flowing. In cases where the notes of the LP are not repeated but are rather stated only once, the brackets will not be used and the abbreviation will use a slash instead, e.g. 1/5LP. This second case is most common when the left hand must assist the right in stating the melody. Examples of both cases from Sammut's *Three Spirals* can be seen next, with the chord symbols and LP's labeled.

Example 4.3: Left-hand Positions in Éric Sammut's *Three Spirals*⁵

Spiral 2, mm. 22-23

Spiral 1, mm. 1-5a

As can be seen, rhythm is a variable aspect of this technique, and provides the potential for improvising with different meters and textures—Sammut does not have to lock into any particular pattern or ostinato, but can freely fill in the rhythmic gaps created by the right hand to create a spontaneous linear texture. Additionally, the choice of chord tone depends on the harmonic situation at hand: 1/5 and 1/7 are common but other possibilities can be explored and inverted, as seen above.

Arpeggiation

In examining examples 4.2 and 4.3 above, the main limitation with this approach is that for each harmony the hands are tied to specific positions on the marimba. When using a pivot note, the melodic voice moves, but its range is limited to the widest interval one can hold in their hand, which in general will be limited to around an octave or a little more depending on the register. One can simply eliminate the pivot note altogether and use the right hand for exclusively melodic function, as in the Spiral 2 excerpt, or the left hand can assist the right as in the Spiral 1 example. More will be said about this melodic assistance idea later. Another option is to use *arpeggiation*, which provides a method of

⁵ *Spiral 2* by Éric Sammut: m. 22–23. ©2005 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Spiral 1 by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–5. ©2005 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

changing one's hand positions within a single chord and of traversing the marimba in a non-scalar fashion. Sammut demonstrated this with the following improvised example. The “cue-size” staff shows the arpeggiated block positions for each chord inversion.

Example 4.4: Arpeggiation Demo⁶ with Analysis

The musical score for Example 4.4 is divided into two systems. The first system begins with an Em chord in 4/4 time, transitioning to a C chord in 4/4 time. The second system begins with a Bm chord in 2/4 time, transitioning to a D chord in 4/4 time, and finally to an Em chord in 2/4 time. The marimba part is written in a 'cue-size' staff, showing arpeggiated block positions for each chord inversion. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios.

Sammut maintained a linear texture throughout, with some flexibility in his sticking patterns. This demonstration uses a slight reordering of the same four chords as the pivot note example. Notice that at each change of harmony, Sammut begins with the same 1-5-1-3 voicing. In this way, the exercise can be seen as a greatly elaborated version of the planing concept. Both hands can move up and down within a given harmony, always beginning each new chord with the same voicing. Melodic motion and the pivot note concept can then be applied to any of these positions, providing the potential for great flexibility within a relatively simple framework.

⁶ Ibid.

Right-hand Options and Introduction to Left-hand Structures

Sammut then proceeded to further demonstrate the possibilities of this approach by performing a short improvisation primarily using diatonic block chords, along with some melodic elaboration. The final four measures of this performance are shown below. Once again, the block positions are analyzed in the lower staff.

Example 4.5: Arpeggiation Improvisation Excerpt⁷ with Analysis

The musical score for Example 4.5 is presented in two systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating E minor or C major. The first system contains measures 1 and 2. Measure 1 is labeled with an E minor (Em) chord above the treble staff. The treble staff features a melodic line starting on E4, and the bass staff features a block chord of E minor (E2, G2, B2). Measure 2 is labeled with C and G chords above the treble staff. The treble staff features a melodic line starting on C4, and the bass staff features a block chord of C major (C2, E2, G2). The second system contains measures 3 and 4. Measure 3 is labeled with A minor (Am) and E minor (Em) chords above the treble staff. The treble staff features a melodic line starting on A4, and the bass staff features a block chord of A minor (A2, C3, E3). Measure 4 is labeled with B and E minor (Em) chords above the treble staff. The treble staff features a melodic line starting on B4, and the bass staff features a block chord of E minor (E2, G2, B2). The final measure of the excerpt (measure 4) features a treble staff with a melodic line ending on E4 and a bass staff with a block chord of E minor (E2, G2, B2). The score includes various musical notations such as accidentals, ties, and triplets.

Note that there are two accidentals in this example: the D# in the first measure acts as a chromatic lower neighbor to the E, while Sammut uses a D# to form a proper V chord in the key of E minor in the final measure. Additionally, there are two important details that need to be discussed. Firstly, although it appears as though Sammut is using a pivot note in the right hand through most of this example, he is technically employing broken harmonic intervals instead: the right hand is simply playing parallel sixths and thirds. So, within a short time three main right-hand textures have been demonstrated. Generally, the right hand can either play exclusively melodic material (as in the first measure of the above example, or

⁷ Ibid.

the Spiral 2 excerpt from Example 4.3), play melodically with one voice while utilizing a pivot note in the other (as in example 4.1 and 4.2), or play harmonized melodic material through the use of double stops or broken harmonic intervals. These intervals frequently consist of thirds, sixths, and octaves, although other possibilities can be found in Sammut's music. For instance, in mm. 35–51 of his *Variations on Porgy and Bess*, the right hand part consists of double-stop parallel major sevenths:

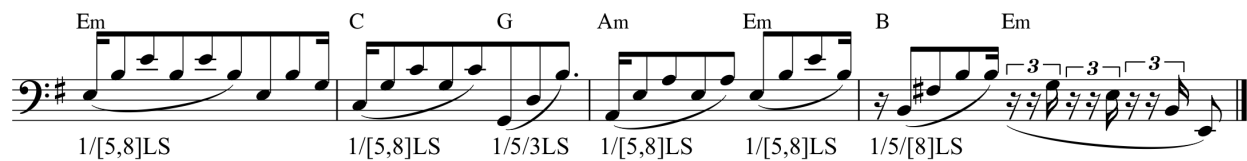
Example 4.6: Éric Sammut, *Variations on Porgy and Bess*, mm. 36–37⁸



The second point is that although in terms of hand position the block analysis given in Example 4.5 is useful, Sammut is really thinking of his left hand in groups of three notes rather than in pairs. The first two beats of the first measure make this very clear: Sammut plays a low E bass note and a B a fifth above, seemingly utilizing a 1/5LP. However, he then adds a pitch by shifting his hand up to the higher E and then proceeds to rotate between this high E and the lower B, essentially forming a [5,1]LP. These three notes taken together form what will be referred to as a *left-hand structure*, or LS. A left-hand structure is formed by stacking harmonically relevant pitches on top of an existing left-hand position. Frequently the upper two notes of a left-hand structure form a rotation interval, which is the case in this example. Because this particular instance uses the three pitches E, B, and a higher E on an E minor chord, it will be abbreviated as follows: 1/[5,8]LS. The square brackets still designate the rotation interval. The following example shows the left hand part of Example 4.5, highlighting the use of left-hand structures.

⁸ *Variations on Porgy and Bess* by Éric Sammut: mm. 36–37. ©2015 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 4.7: Arpeggiation Improvisation—Left-hand Structure Analysis



The final measure demonstrates a brief example of a *rotation note* (rather than a rotation interval)—the upper B is repeated alone without returning to the lower F#. Left-hand structures provide a means of achieving rhythmic flexibility in a linear way utilizing three-note sonorities, in contrast to a more typical pianistic ‘stride’ accompaniment that, while still useful, is limited in terms of stylistic, textural, and metric possibilities. It is also more repetitive, and predictable—traits Sammut typically avoids. *Patate Rag* is the only published composition of Sammut’s that deliberately uses a ‘stride’ accompaniment pattern.

Many improvisational and analytic tools have been introduced in the previous examples, but Sammut has developed these ideas in a logical fashion. The basic planing exercise can be extended through melodic motion and the pivot note, as well as through arpeggiation. Out of these concepts emerges more interesting harmonic and melodic motion, as well as the left-hand positions and structures that are at the heart of Sammut’s playing. Much more will be said about left-hand structures later in this chapter, but first, two harmonic exercises will be investigated that begin to utilize multiple keys and / or modes, as well as offer the opportunity to experiment with the full spectrum of control, moving between a mixture of the two hands on one extreme and total separation on the other, all the while maintaining a fundamental harmonic structure.

Harmonic Motion and the Assisted Melody

ii-V-I Exercises

In order to expand one’s harmonic and melodic possibilities, it is necessary to practice specific diatonic chord progressions. Up to this point, harmonic motion has been either scalar or in simple, nearly arbitrary leaps. A specific and important progression Sammut practices is the ii-V-I, a progression found frequently in pop music and jazz standards. His approach is initially another expansion of the planing idea. He demonstrated some simple possibilities as shown in Example 4.9. With a couple of brief

Example 4.8: Diatonic ii-V-I Demo⁹ / Analysis

⁹ Ibid.

Notice the use of arpeggiation in the right hand in measures six, eight, and ten, highlighted with slurs and the “Arp.” marking. Notice also the use of three-note left-hand structures in measures seven, eight, and ten. Essentially he is taking a root-position seventh chord progression, and then adding a Latin-oriented rhythmic feel and simple melodic elaborations. The G7 chord is often anticipated by a sixteenth note. Significantly, his left hand remains relatively static, only deviating from the [1,5]LS’s a few times. His right hand is more active. In essence, he is playing *variations* on the root position ii-V-I progression outlined in the first two measures of the analytic reduction above.

This exercise should be played in other keys as well. When other keys become more comfortable, Sammut recommends using this as a modulation exercise. The I chord can be converted into the ii of the key a whole step below by lowering the third and seventh degrees by a half step, which abruptly shifts the music into the new key. Sammut demonstrated this with another improvisation.

Example 4.9: ii-V-I Modulation Demo¹⁰ / Analysis

♩ = 84

Cm^7 F^7 Bb^{maj7} Bb^m7 Bb^m7 Eb^7 Ab^{maj7} Ab^m7 Db^7 (Assist.)

[1,5]LP

Arp.

1/[5,8]LS

Gbm^{maj7} $F\#m^7$ B^7 Em^{aj7}

1/[5,8]LS

Arp.

1/[5,8]LS

¹⁰ Ibid.

Example 4.9, continued.

This example modulates down by whole steps every two bars, and features examples of left hand positions and structures, as well as arpeggiation in both hands. Sammut continues the quasi-Latin rhythmic feel. The fourth measure, on the Db7 chord, as well as the second to last measure, on the D major seventh chord (both marked “Assist.”), show Sammut’s left hand breaking away from the bass register to assist in playing faster melodic passages. These are examples of playing two-handed, or *assisted*, melodies, within the context of an otherwise two or three-part texture. Sammut stresses the importance of being able to shift between the separate control of the multi-part texture and the ‘mixed’ control of the assisted melody. To develop *variable control*—this ability to change controls fluidly—he recommends an improvisatory exercise based on the blues form.

Three-Mallet Blues

The exercise Sammut suggests for experimenting with variable control is to improvise over a basic 12-bar blues form using only three mallets: two in the left, and one in the right. As a first step, the hands are separate and the left hand comps with basic two-note voicings as might be used when playing a blues on the vibraphone. The voicings consist of the third and seventh chord tones, with the exact configuration determined by voice leading. The right hand, using only one mallet, plays melodically using primarily the blues scale in the appropriate key, with various embellishments. Using only one mallet in the right hand simplifies the texture so that the player can focus on the stark contrast between the hands, without being distracted by right hand harmonization or complex sticking issues that would arise with an extra mallet. The left hand part is simplified because no bass notes are played, making this

essentially a two-part (two-dimensional) improvisation. The left hand should maintain its accompanimental role while the right takes on the sole responsibility of the melody. This separation should be felt and heard—be sure the left hand comping stays dynamically underneath the right hand, and that right hand phrasing and melodic shaping is neither affected by, or affects, the left hand. This is where the separation of control, explored through the study of Bach's two-part inventions, bears directly on Sammut's improvisation. Another issue that arises with this exercise is that of maintaining the form—this all happens within the structure of the 12-bar blues, in a medium swing tempo. The fact that the roots of the chords are not being played by the left hand forces the player to hear and keep track of the form internally.

Once this process is comfortable, the second step is to allow the left hand to occasionally assist the right hand in playing the melody. This allows for faster and/or more elaborate melodic possibilities, and helps develop variable control: when the left hand assists the right, it must match the right hand in terms of dynamics, phrasing, etc. When the left returns to its accompaniment role, the comping must be picked up as if nothing ever changed—as if the left hand had been comping the whole time. This is the technical challenge. The mental challenge lies in the fact that, when the left hand assists the right, it is no longer hovering over the appropriate chords, which increases the difficulty of maintaining the form: one must keep track of the chord changes internally even if the chords are not actually played. The following examples show two blues choruses as demonstrated by Sammut, with the first using predominantly separate control, and the second utilizing assisted melodies more frequently. When Sammut plays an assisted melody, the notes played with the left hand are marked with “2” (indicating the sticking—mallet 1 is not used for melodic purposes) and “x” note heads, to make the use of the left hand clear.

Example 4.10: Three-mallet Blues Example¹¹, First Chorus

Example 4.11: Three-mallet Blues Example, Second Chorus

In the above examples, the left hand voicings are analyzed in terms of left-hand positions as before, marked without a rotation interval because they are only played as double-stops. Sammut does not incorporate assisted melodies until measure nine. He then proceeds to shift between separate and mixed control in nearly every phrase. Notice that quite often longer melodic ideas are stretched across the barlines: for instance, the first four measures of the second chorus constitute one four-bar melodic phrase, with a balance of melodic assistance and comping in the left hand. The melodic material in this chorus is more elaborate than in the first, but the trade-off is that when the melody is busier, the left hand is not available for accompaniment. This is a clear example of Towner's comment above that "...it is not

¹¹ Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 1."

aesthetically necessary [to play multiple parts simultaneously] in order to carry out a multiple-part solo performance." As long as the overall form and character of each individual part is maintained consistently, the effect will be a polyphonic realization of the structure.

Further Development of Left Hand Structures

Three-step Left Hand Development

The concept of the left-hand structure has been introduced and applied to several examples thus far. Sammut's use of this tool represents a central aspect of his improvisational style. He demonstrated a method of practicing this technique with an improvised example that shows the development of the left-hand structure in three distinct steps: first, the application of a 1-2-2 sticking to a two-voice position, followed by the addition of a third pitch to form a three-note structure, and finally a drop in register to incorporate much lower bass notes, resulting in a much wider physical wing span for the performer. Step One is shown in the following example:

Example 4.12: Left-hand Structure Development,¹² Step One

$\text{♩} = 110$
STEP 1

Chords: G, G/F, G, C/E, Cm/Eb, G/D, A/C#, D

Bass line patterns (Left Hand):

- Measure 1: 1/[5]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 2: (etc) 1/[5]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 3: 1/[5]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 4: 3/[1]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 5: 3/[1]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 6: 5/[3]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 7: 3/[1]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2
- Measure 8: 1/[5]LP (triplet), 2, 2, 1, 2, 2

The bass line gradually descends over the course of this excerpt, with a consistent 1-2-2 sticking employed throughout in the left hand. Both mallets of the right hand are used in the statement of the

¹² All three steps transcribed from Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 1."

melody. This example incorporates polyrhythm very explicitly, highlighting the close relationship between this technique and the polyrhythmic exercises from the previous chapter, while promoting separate control of the hands in yet another context. As before, Sammut’s focus is not so much on the intricate cross-rhythms but rather on the overall effect of the music—there is a relaxed, smooth rhythmic flow that cannot be completely captured in notation.

Step Two adds one pitch to the LP’s of the previous example and incorporates a rotation interval. The bass notes occur half as often. Occasionally, as in measures two and three, the upper note of the LS and the melody occupy the same pitch. In cases such as this, it is important that the dynamics, tone color, etc. of each part remains intact so that the continuity of the parts is not obscured when the voices overlap. The right hand / melody and the bass line must remain strong, while the notes of the rotation interval should be softer, “like chords.”

Example 4.13: Left-hand Structure Development, Step Two

The musical score for Example 4.13 is written in 5/6 time and consists of two systems of four measures each. The first system (measures 9-12) is in the key of D major (one sharp). Measure 9 features a G major triad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (G, A, B) and a quarter note (D). Measure 10 features a D/F# dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (D, E, F#) and a quarter note (G). Measure 11 features a C/E dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (C, D, E) and a quarter note (F#). Measure 12 features a Cm/Eb dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (C, D, E) and a quarter note (F#). The second system (measures 13-16) is in the key of A major (two sharps). Measure 13 features a G/D dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (G, A, B) and a quarter note (D). Measure 14 features an A/C# dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (A, B, C#) and a quarter note (D). Measure 15 features a D dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (D, E, F#) and a quarter note (G). Measure 16 features a D dyad in the right hand and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (D, E, F#) and a quarter note (G). The left hand plays a consistent 1-2-2-1-2-2 pattern throughout. The right hand plays a melody with various intervals and rests. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Finally, in Step Three the left hand is dropped one octave to maximize the contrast between the bass and the melody in terms of register. This example also features broken and stacked parallel octaves in the right hand with some independent rolls. Note that the left hand sticking for all three excerpts has been the same consistent 1-2-2-1-2-2 pattern. Sometimes mallet one is responsible for the bass notes, and sometimes it plays a part in the rotation interval.

Example 4.14: Left-hand Structure Development, Step Three

STEP 3

17 G D/F# 7:8 Dm/F C/E

21 Cm/Eb G/D A/C# D G

1/[5,3]LS 3/[1,5]LS 3/[1,5]LS 3/[1,5]LS 3/[1,5]LS 3/[1,5]LS 5/[3,1]LS 1/[5,3]LS 1/5/3LS

These three steps taken together represent a method of practicing the application of left-hand structures to various chord progressions: first, find a series of two-voice positions that outline the desired bass line and important fundamental harmonic tones, then add a pitch to these to form LS's, and finally, expand the range to cover more of the marimba at once. The right hand could incorporate polymetric or polyrhythmic ideas, make use of pivot notes or harmonic intervals, or play simple melodies incorporating both of the right-held mallets. One could improvise melodically, or use this process to practice harmonizing familiar melodies, as one might do on a piano. The ultimate goal of this technique is to realize bass and harmony with the left hand underneath and around a flowing melody—and as Sammut remarked, “It’s not easy to find something with two mallets, doing bass and chords!”¹³ The rhythm of the left hand is here kept simple and straightforward. Once this concept is comfortable, there are endless possibilities for rhythmic and harmonic variation, as well as textural options for the interaction of the hands. The best source of ideas is the published music of Sammut.

¹³ Ibid.

Rhythmic, Harmonic, and Textural Variety: Examples from Sammut's Music

*The exercises I use to do arrangements are all now in my music, already written, in terms of position, in terms of bass, and chords, and patterns.*¹⁴

The following presents a series of example excerpts from the published music of Éric Sammut. Each excerpt is accompanied by a brief analytical sketch that ‘distills’ the surface down to a skeletal melodic and harmonic presentation. Chord changes and LS/LP designations are included, along with other annotations as necessary. Following each example is a brief commentary. These examples serve to show numerous applications of the above concepts, and to demonstrate how great variety can be achieved through mastery of a relatively small number of techniques. One central feature of these excerpts as highlighted in the sketches is Sammut's consistent use of five, six, and even seven-part harmony, made possible through linear counterpoint and left-hand structures.

Example 4.15: Éric Sammut, *Dance of the Knights*, mm. 64–67¹⁵

The musical score for Example 4.15 is presented in two systems. The top system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a single bass clef staff below it. The bottom system also consists of a grand staff and a single bass clef staff below it. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score features a complex left-hand structure with triplets and chords. The right hand plays a melodic line with some harmonization. Chord changes are indicated above the staff: Em, Bm/D, F#7/C# Bm. The left hand has annotations: 1/[5,3]LS, 1/[5,3]LS, 3/[1,5]LS, 1/[5,8]LS.

This excerpt features a very basic, albeit polyrhythmic, use of left-hand structures. The right hand plays predominantly melodic material, with a few instances of harmonization. The end of the third measure makes use of a passing chord that is not labeled as an LP. This is a clear example of implied five-part harmony: three tones sustained in the left hand and two in the right.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Dance of the Knights* by Éric Sammut: mm. 64–67. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 4.16: Éric Sammut, *Variations on Porgy and Bess*, mm. 117–120¹⁶

The *Porgy* excerpt is again very straightforward, with broken octaves in the right hand throughout. One unique feature is the brief melodic motion in the left hand harmony in the last measure: the upper D of the LS resolves to C (a 9–8 resolution) on the last beat. For a similar use of LS’s in an odd meter, see the B section of *Hombre d’Aout*.

Example 4.17: Éric Sammut, *Italian Song*, mm. 47–50¹⁷

Sammut’s arrangement of *Italian Song* makes use of a perpetual linear texture. The above example shows how the rhythm of the rotation interval can be adjusted to ‘fill in’ the rhythmic gaps

¹⁶ *Variations on Porgy and Bess* by Éric Sammut: mm. 117–120. ©2015 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

¹⁷ *Italian Song* by Éric Sammut: mm. 47–50. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

created by the right hand melody. Sammut uses this technique often in his improvisations as it enables a continuous flow of melody and harmony.

Example 4.18: Éric Sammut, *Italian Song*, mm. 1–4¹⁸

This is another example from *Italian Song*. The left hand in the second measure uses an *extension* of the left-hand structure to fill out more harmonic tones, in an imitative manner, by allowing mallet two to continue up the scale in conjunction with the right hand. In the next measure, the left-hand structure is expanded by arpeggiation up to an A above the bass staff.

Example 4.19: Éric Sammut, *Rotation 1*, mm. 23¹⁹

¹⁸ *Italian Song* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–4. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

¹⁹ *Rotation 1* by Éric Sammut: mm. 23. ©1996 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

This excerpt from *Rotation 1* features an alternate LS sticking: 1-2-1, 2-1-2 instead of 1-2-2, 1-2-2, underneath an essentially octatonic melody in parallel octaves, within the context of a challenging polyrhythm. The underlying harmony is static for the entire passage.

Example 4.20: Éric Sammut, *Rotation 1*, mm. 4–7²⁰

The musical score for Example 4.20 consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the right hand and the lower staff is for the left hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into five measures. Above the staves, the following chord symbols are written: Bm7, Ebm7, Dmaj7(#11), C#7(sus4), and Cm7. Below the staves, the following labels are written: 1/[5,9]LS, 1/[5,9]LS, 1/7LP, 1/7LP, and 1/[5,8]LS. The right hand plays a melody in parallel octaves, while the left hand plays a static harmonic structure. The score includes a variety of note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The polyrhythm is indicated by the 1-2-1, 2-1-2 sticking pattern.

This example, also from *Rotation 1*, features a more complex relationship between the hands. In the second and third measures, the upper pitch of the left-hand structure plays a melodic, as well as harmonic, role. In the sketch, double-stemmed notes with “x” note heads indicate the pitches that are playing a role in the left hand harmony as well as assisting in the statement of the melody. The first and last measures of this excerpt could be labeled *assisted harmony*—the right hand is not really playing melodically but is rather filling out the harmony and the texture, interrupted by a surprising burst of melodic activity in the inner two measures.

²⁰ *Rotation 1* by Éric Sammut: mm. 4–7. ©1996 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 4.21: Éric Sammut, *Snake's Dream*, mm. 35–37²¹

The most interesting aspects of the above passage are the off-balance feeling created by the meter, the use of parallel minor ninths in the right hand, and the surprising harmonic progression that descends chromatically with much syncopation in the bass part. The harmony descends from Cm-Bm-Bbm-Am, with a colorful (and functional) dominant chord preceding each chord (except the initial C minor). The left-hand structures are identical on each change of harmony, and do not make use of a rotation interval.

Example 4.22: Éric Sammut, *Rotation 2*, mm. 21–24²²

²¹ *Snakes Dream* by Éric Sammut: mm. 35–37. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

²² *Rotation 2* by Éric Sammut: mm. 21–24. ©1996 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

The beginning of the B section of *Rotation 2* is the first example thus far to make use of a pivot note in the right hand, while the left hand again uses the alternate sticking 1-2-1, 2-1-2. The significance of the pivot note is that it expands the sonority set up by the left hand. The sketch reflects this in that the left hand notes, along with the pivot note, are marked as whole notes underneath the moving top line. Sammut is able to give the illusion of a sustained four-note chord underneath a moving fifth part, as opposed to a sustained three-note chord with a harmonized melody as in the previous examples.

Example 4.23: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 1–4²³

The musical score for Example 4.23 shows the first four measures of 'Ameline' by Éric Sammut. The score is in 7/8 time and features a piano (mf) dynamic. The right hand plays a descending chromatic line, while the left hand plays a sustained four-note chord. The chord is marked as 1/[5,9]LS in measures 1-3 and [1,5]LP in measure 4. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score includes a treble and bass staff for the piano and a grand staff for the marimba.

The opening statement of *Ameline* also features a pivot note underneath the chromatically descending thematic statement. The pivot note remains on an A for the duration of the first three measures, acting as an internal pedal point around which the rest of the music revolves.

²³ *Ameline* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–4. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 4.24: Éric Sammut, *Spiral 3*, mm. 105–109²⁴

Tranquillo

Chord progression: A \emptyset 7, D7, Bm7, Em7, A7

Intervals: 1/[7,3]LS, 1/[3,7]LS, 1/[7,3]LS, 1/[5,8]LS, 1/7/3LS

The coda of the third *Spiral* contains briefly stated pivot notes in the right hand that take part in a tonally oriented, colorful chord progression: ii-V7-iii-vi-II7. The voice leading created by the harmonic tones is very smooth and pianistic.

Example 4.25: Éric Sammut, *Stroboscope*, mm. 1–4²⁵

Chord progression: Bm7, Dm7, Am7

Intervals: 1/[7,3]LS, 1/[7,9]LS, 1/[7,3]LS

Marking: C.E.S.H.

This excerpt from the opening of *Stroboscope* not only makes use of four-part sustained chords through the application of pivot notes, but also features a moving inner line within the left-hand structure in the third and fourth measures. The marking “C.E.S.H.” is an acronym for “Chromatic Elaboration of

²⁴ *Spiral 3* by Éric Sammut: mm. 105–109. ©2005 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

²⁵ *Stroboscope* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–4. ©2000 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Static Harmony,” attributed to saxophonist and jazz educator Jerry Coker by Bert Ligon²⁶ in his book, *Connecting Chords with Linear Harmony*, referenced in an earlier chapter. The governing harmony of these latter measures is Am7, with the chromatic inner line creating contrary motion with the right hand melody.

Brief Motivic Analysis of Caméléon

The following examples revisit a piece that was looked at in the previous chapter in terms of linear counterpoint, Sammut’s *Caméléon*. Armed with the analytic tools established in the present chapter, a little more light can be thrown on the piece from both a harmonic, and a compositional perspective.

Example 4.26: Éric Sammut, *Caméléon*, mm. 2–7: Motivic Analysis (1)²⁷

The musical score for Example 4.26 is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 2-4) features a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 8/8, which changes to 4/4 in measure 3 and 3/2 in measure 4. The second system (measures 5-7) features a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a time signature of 10/8, which changes to 15/8 in measure 6 and 12/8 in measure 7. The score includes chord symbols (Am⁹, Emaj⁷, C#m⁷, G#m⁷, Dmaj⁷, C#m⁷), dynamic markings (mf, f), and linear set labels (1/5/[9,3]LS, 1/5/[8,11]LS, 1/[5,9]LS, 1/5/[7,3]LS, 1/[7,9]LS) below the staves.

²⁶ Ligon, 15.

²⁷ *Cameleon* by Éric Sammut: mm. 2–7. ©2009 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

This example demonstrates many of the previous concepts applied in conjunction with one another. The most striking feature of this excerpt is the frequent use of large, four-note left-hand structures. The first, second, fourth, and fifth measures all incorporate this technique. The fifth chord tone is added above the root, but below the two pitches of the rotation interval. This gives *Caméléon* a very rich sound. The second, fourth, and fifth measures, like the Rotation 1 example above, make use of “double-duty” left hand pitches that both fill out the harmony and assist the melody. As before, the relevant notes are marked in the sketch as double-stemmed “x” notes.

There is also a three-note chord marked on the treble staff in the first measure of the sketch. If the lower E and G of the right hand in this measure are treated (through linear counterpoint) as inner voices, then an important motive is exposed in this opening gesture, indicated through the large-scale beaming. Beginning on the third degree of the harmony (the pitch C on an A minor chord), there is a scalar descent of five pitches down the A dorian scale: C, B, A, G, F#. This motive is repeated, transposed up a major third, two measures later: E, D#, C#, B, A#, on the C# minor chord, also exposed on the sketch with the lower E of the third measure interpreted as a brief instance of a pivot note. In the final measure of the excerpt, the motive is shown in an altered form, as it is placed on a major harmony, expanded to six pitches, and skips are added between the second and third, as well as between the fourth and fifth tones. This motive turns out to be a central aspect of the piece, as it is brought back again and again in various guises. One prominent motivic statement occurs during mm. 29–32, the same passage that was discussed in the previous chapter. See the example once more presented below:

Example 4.27: Éric Sammut, *Caméléon*, mm. 29–32: Motivic Analysis (2)²⁸

The musical score for Example 4.27 is presented in two systems, each containing a grand staff and a separate bass line staff. The first system (measures 29-30) is in Eb minor (Eb7) and Bbm7. The second system (measures 31-32) is in C#m7 and G#m7. The right hand of the grand staff plays a broken octave figure with a five-measure slur. The left hand of the grand staff plays a truncated four-note version of the opening motive. The bass line staff shows the harmonic structure with chords and intervals. Measure 29 is in Eb minor (Eb7), and measure 30 is in Bbm7. Measure 31 is in C#m7, and measure 32 is in G#m7. The bass line intervals are labeled as 1/[5,8]LS for measures 29-30 and 1/[7,3]LS for measures 31-32.

Now these measures can be understood on a deeper level. Three-note left-hand structures are used throughout, with broken octaves in the right hand stating two back-to-back, truncated (four-note) versions of the opening motive of the piece, stated first in Eb minor, and then transposed down a step to C# minor.

Another example of this motive can be found in measures 60–63 of the B section, shown next:

²⁸ *Cameleon* by Éric Sammut: mm. 29–32. ©2009 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 4.28: Éric Sammut, *Caméléon*, mm. 60–63: Motivic Analysis (3)²⁹

The left hand maintains an octave ostinato, marked as a [1/8]LP, for the majority of this excerpt, with a brief instance of arpeggiation at the end of the phrases. The right hand begins with broken parallel fourths and then descends with the familiar five-note motive, this time on an Ab mixolydian scale. The striking feature of this excerpt is the large-scale planing that occurs in the second two measures: measures 60–61 are literally planed down the key and repeated in Gb lydian (with the exception of the last two chords of the excerpt).

The motivic statements thus far have come in pairs: the opening measures repeated it in quick succession, transposed up a major third; in measures 29–32 the motive is shortened to four pitches and repeated, transposed down a major second; and now in this final example, the motive is repeated twice in

²⁹ *Cameleon* by Éric Sammut: mm. 60–63. ©2009 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

five-note form but shifted modally to Ab mixolydian and then planed, rather than transposed, down a step to Gb lydian. These three motivic pairs are summarized in the following example:

Example 4.29: Three Motivic Pairs in *Caméléon*

The image displays three pairs of musical motifs on a single staff, each pair consisting of two measures. The first pair, labeled 'Initial statement (m. 2)' and 'Transposed Up Major Third (m. 4)', shows a sequence of notes in G major (G, A, B, C, D) and its transposition up a major third to B major (B, C, D, E, F#). The second pair, labeled 'Truncated Statement (mm. 29-30)' and 'Transposed Down Major Second (mm. 31-32)', shows a sequence of notes in G major (G, A, B, C, D) and its transposition down a major second to F major (F, G, A, B, C). The third pair, labeled 'Mixolydian Statement (m. 60)' and 'Planed Down to Lydian (m. 62)', shows a sequence of notes in G mixolydian (G, A, B, C, D, E, F) and its planing down to Gb lydian (Gb, Ab, Bb, C, D, Eb, F).

This brief motivic analysis could be continued, but it has served its purpose, which was twofold: first, to show how the application of the analytic tools explored in this and the previous chapters can inform one's understanding and interpretation of Sammut's music; second, to throw a brief light on Éric Sammut's compositional integrity. There is a keen balance of the intellectual/compositional on one side, and the intuitive/improvisational on the other side of Sammut's musicianship. Chapter Five will explore this more directly, but before this can be tackled, there is one more vital piece of the puzzle that must be illuminated: Éric Sammut's conception of improvisation as *variation*.

Sammut's Variation Concept

The ii-V-I examples above (examples 4.9 and 4.11) proved to be essentially rhythmic variations on a series of root-position chords. Sammut primarily utilized rhythmic (as well as minimal melodic) variation to incorporate a sense of style and feel to an otherwise simple chord exercise. However, this is only one aspect of what Sammut means when he refers to playing variations. Improvising variations over a preconceived musical structure involves the real time manipulation of rhythm, melody, and harmony, and Sammut has a thoughtful approach to gradually building this skill. Sammut likened himself to a baroque musician, so a word should be said on the approach to improvisational melodic embellishment known during the Renaissance and the Baroque periods as *free ornamentation*.

Free Ornamentation and Sammut's Melodic Improvisation

From about the middle of the baroque period, two situations particularly required free ornamentation in order to complete the design intended. One is the more or less improvised variation of the repeated first section in da capo arias. The other is the more or less improvised melody, for which only the supporting harmony-notes may be notated, in many slow movements by such composers as Corelli or Handel.³⁰

The above quotation highlights the context in which melodic improvisation was appropriate during the Baroque period. The practice of free ornamentation differs from the improvised realization of figured bass, which was focused more on harmony and accompaniment rather than displays of melodic prowess. Free ornamentation is the closest parallel to modern melodic jazz improvisation. Whether in a da capo aria or the slow movements for which only the 'structural' notes are given, a pre-composed melody serves as the guide to the improvisation. This melody is to be embellished without being completely obscured:

For the first section of da capo arias, little if any free ornamentation is required, and few specific ornaments; for the middle section, not much more; for the da capo repeat, considerably more, yet not so as to distort or obliterate the original melody: cadenzas, if introduced, should be of moderate proportions. Similarly with the composing, more or less by improvisation, of an actual melody for that common class of adagio which Dr. Burney called 'little more than an outline left to the performers [sic] abilities to colour.' With whatever proportions of preparation, memorization or improvisation, this melody must sound as if it were being made up by spontaneous invention. Structural notes (i.e. those written) may generally be performed more strongly than the flexible chains of ornamental notes connecting them. Sometimes, however, an accented passing note may take the beat, thus postponing and lightening a structural note. Un-accented passing notes whether few or many, arpeggiation whether simple or partially melodic, and changing notes in every variety are further resources. The musical material used for creating an ornamental melody out of a mere structural skeleton as notated should have that relevance and consistency which all good composition demands; the effect in performance being kept light in emphasis and unfettered in rhythm.³¹

Robert Donnington provides several examples of notated free ornamentation in his book, *Baroque Music: Style and Performance* that demonstrate the embellishment of structural melodies. The first of these is shown in the next example, a late Renaissance melody by Caccini (the opening phrase of "Ardi Cor

³⁰ Robert Donnington, *Baroque Music: Style and Performance—A Handbook*, (New York: Norton W.W. & Company, 1982): 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

Mio”). The structural melody is presented on the top staff as notated in the manuscript, while the bottom staff indicates the embellished version that can be found in Caccini’s *Nuove Musiche*, published in 1602.

Example 4.30: Giulio Caccini, *Ardi Cor Mio*, mm. 1–8³²

The image displays a musical score for Giulio Caccini's 'Ardi Cor Mio', measures 1 through 8. It is written in 8/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is presented in two systems, each with two staves. The top staff of each system shows the structural melody, and the bottom staff shows the embellished version. The lyrics are written below the staves. The first system covers measures 1-4, and the second system covers measures 5-8. The embellished version features more complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and melismas, while the structural melody consists of simpler, longer notes.

In general, the structural notes coincide rhythmically with their embellished counterparts. In the fourth measure of the excerpt, the embellished version anticipates the arrival of the main notes, while the lyrics are first delayed and then anticipated. For example, the D arrives at the end of the third measure, with C entering on beat two of measure four rather than beat four. This continues to the end of the measure. The arrival of the A on the downbeat of measure five is anticipated by two beats, with the parts not realigning until the second half of the fifth measure. The ornamentation consists primarily of short melismatic flourishes on individual syllables, which brings up a point: because this excerpt is of a vocal piece, the importance of the structural notes is emphasized by the fact that they are shaped by the lyrics. The lyrics determine the main melodic notes, which in turn determine the embellishments. This closely mirrors the pre-bebop jazz tradition of taking a popular song (with lyrics) and improvising on the melody. The birth of bebop in the 1940’s brought with it a more harmonically driven approach to melodic improvisation.³³

Éric Sammut’s thoughts on melodic improvisation closely mirror the above description in terms of being aware of the essential notes, while treating other notes as embellishment:

Before, I was very impressed with [fast jazz melody]. Wow! I thought all was in the melody. And in fact, I understood it's like Bach's music—you have some important notes, and the rest is just passage, notes of passage, you know? It's [a] transition, links to go [between the important notes]. And now, I think it's important to play the main notes, and if you're inspired to [play] arpeggios, you [play] arpeggios; if you want to do a scale

³² Ibid., 99–100.

³³ Werner, *Effortless Mastery of Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm*.

between two notes, you do it; or you [go] directly [between] this note and this note... All is open. But the [most] important is to have the main notes—they're called the 'blue' notes. Very important. The most essential notes. And, to express something, to sing—this is more important than to play notes. Play music—colors, like a painter.³⁴

This idea of connecting the main notes—the ‘blue notes’ as Sammut says—relates back to the examples of linear counterpoint in Bach from the previous chapter. Sammut’s method of playing the cello suites involves finding and bringing out the ‘blue notes’ in each passage, while the rest of the notes are there for transitional and contextual reasons. He compares this to jazz melody, which is appropriate: in *Connecting Chords with Linear Harmony*, Bert Ligon asserts that most bebop vocabulary can be understood as embellishments of simple melodic resolutions.³⁵ Kenny Werner provides a similar approach to line development, thinking of scales and arpeggios as linkage between target notes.³⁶ The practice of free ornamentation provides a centuries-old prototype for this approach to spontaneous music making.

Marimba Variations: Ameline

Within the context of solo marimba improvisation, the performer is responsible for more than just melodic elaboration. Sammut summarizes his approach to developing solo marimba improvisation with the following suggestions:

You don't need to feel, really, 'improvisation'—you can feel more like variation. It's simpler. For this reason your left hand must be almost the same as you play normally, but change only the right.

Attention must be more on the harmony, you know, the colors. And then, step by step, you will find some position by reflexes. So, if you don't change too much the left, then you have more ideas step by step on the right, and then you can [free] the left and do something else with both hands.³⁷

Sammut starts with a relatively stable left-hand part, as in the left-hand structure exercises above. He suggests keeping the left hand “almost the same” while exploring right-hand possibilities before varying the left too much. This brings back the idea of developing *reflexes*—after deciding on the desired

³⁴ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

³⁵ Ligon, 6.

³⁶ Werner, *Effortless Mastery of Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm*.

³⁷ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

chords/colors, the goal is to have the left hand working on automatic pilot, so to speak, so the focus can be on the structure of the music rather than technique, independence, etc.

For a clear example of this in action, and a summary of the techniques and concepts discussed in this chapter, see Sammut's original piece, *Ameline*. This piece provides, in Sammut's words, "a good example of a variation."³⁸ Sammut composed *Ameline* in one day, the fastest he composed any of his pieces.³⁹ For this reason, out of all of his published pieces *Ameline* comes closest to capturing his in-the-moment improvisation. The opening 30 measures form a thematic statement, while the next 30 represent a written-out variation that demonstrates the idea of keeping the left hand "almost the same" while changing the right hand more drastically. The following examples will look closely at the first 16 measures alongside their variation counterparts, accompanied by analytical reductions and commentary as presented in the previous examples.

Example 4.31: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 1–5, 33–36: Variation Comparison (1)⁴⁰

♩ = 96 **Theme**
F#m(maj7) Bm7 E(b6) (E)

1/[5,9]LS [1,5]LP 1/5LP

Variation

1/[5,9]LS 1/[5,9]LS [1,5]LP 1/5LP

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sammut, "Seminar Interview."

⁴⁰ *Ameline* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–17, 33–48. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

The opening four measures were analyzed previously: left-hand structures and positions support a chromatically descending melody with a pivot note on a low treble-staff A. During the variation, the left hand is literally the same. The rhythm of the right hand is also unchanged, but the melody is dropped down to a starting pitch of B and the pivot note forms double stops with the top line. The descending melody arrives at the final C-B resolution in measure four, and the variation melody approaches the same resolution from below—Sammut’s variation has the same melodic goal as his theme.

Example 4.32: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 6–9, 37–40: Variation Comparison (2)

The musical score for Example 4.32 is divided into two systems. The first system, labeled '(Theme)', shows measures 6-9 in 7/8 time. The right hand has a chromatically descending melody starting on A4, with structural notes highlighted. The left hand provides harmonic support with chords labeled 1/[5,9]LS, [1,5]LP, and 1/5LP. The second system, labeled '(Variation)', shows measures 37-40 in 4/4 time. The right hand melody is similar but starts on B4. The left hand features a 'Rhythmic Alteration' and includes an 'Inverted LP' (3/1LP) and an '(Assist.)' section. The harmonic labels for the Variation are 1/[5,9]LS, 3/1LP, [1,5]LP, and 1/5LP.

In this second excerpt, the harmonies are identical but in the second measure Sammut uses an inverted 3/1LP and then incorporates his left hand into the melodic embellishment. This is a good example of simple melodic variation: the structural notes as highlighted in the sketch of the Theme are present as well in the Variation, marked with large-scale beaming. The only exception is that the C natural of the Theme is treated as a C sharp in the Variation, brightening the end of the phrase. The descending melody is then simply elaborated with neighbor, passing, and escape tones.

Example 4.33: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 9–17, 44–48: Variation Comparison (3)

(Theme)

9 Bm⁷ E⁷ Am D⁷

1/5,8]LS [1,5]LP 1/5,9]LS [1,5]LP

(Variation)

(Assist.)

1/7LP 1/3,7]LS 1/7,3]LS 1/3/7LS

(Assist.)



(Theme)

13 Gm(maj⁷) G#m⁷ C#⁷

1/5/9]LS [1,7]LP [1,3]LP

(Variation)

(Assist.)

1/5LP [1,7]LP [1,3]LP

The above example is an eight-measure phrase that warrants more detailed discussion. This excerpt exhibits a greater disparity between the Theme and Variation, but they are more closely related than it may appear at first glance. The beaming on the thematic sketch indicates a large-scale descent from C#-B-A-G-F#-E#-D-C# over the course of the eight measures. The descent takes four measures to arrive at the A (on the downbeat of the fifth measure) and then the rate of descent speeds up so that over the course of the next four measures, the A is brought down to the lower C#. This descending material clearly derives from the opening of the theme which itself is a short descent from G# to B. Notice the double beaming in the thematic sketch of mm. 5–7, which indicates a short cell (A-G-F#) that is imitated in the left hand as indicated by the slur and beam on the bass staff, highlighting the importance of the arrival on A and its continuation down the scale.

A close look at the variation allows one to glimpse into the musical mind of Éric Sammut. The left hand structures are all different from the thematic statement, although the bass lines and harmonies are the same. Sammut makes use of assisted melodies in the first, fourth, fifth, and sixth measures of the excerpt (marked “Assist.”) to accommodate the more active melodic line. The sketch reveals a deeper significance to this passage: while the Theme made use of a long descent from C# down to a lower C#, the Variation takes the same idea but expands it, starting not on C# but a minor third higher on E. The E is initiated in the second measure after an assisted pick-up in the first, descending down to A in only two measures with an arrival on the downbeat of the fourth measure, in contrast with the longer four-measure descent to A in the Theme. The descent from A, which was highlighted in the Theme through the repetition of the A-G-F# cell, is interrupted by an assisted inner voice in measures 4-5, and is then picked up again in measure six, indicated by the dotted slur connecting the two A’s in the Variation sketch. From here the descent continues with a series of elaborations including a sudden rise to a high D that drops quickly back to the F# at the end of the seventh measure, arriving at E# on the downbeat of the last measure, a half of a measure later than the Theme. The melody then completes its descent to C# in the last two beats of the last measure. So, the Theme and Variation once again share a final target resolution, just as they have in the previous examples.

Seeing this analysis written out (or worse, put into words) makes it seem overly complicated: did Sammut really “think” of all this detail in the moment? The reality is that this analysis reveals an approach to improvisation that in some ways is much *simpler* than worrying about harmonies, chord/scale relationships, etc. Essentially, the “goal” of each phrase is to resolve to a particular place (B for the first two phrases, and C# for the last longer phrase). While the Variation includes elaborations in the form of rising arpeggios and other devices, the overall guiding force is the idea of reaching upward and then falling back to the target note at the end of the phrase. If one is familiar enough with the relevant scales and modes that make up the construction of the music—as can be achieved through practicing exercises such as planing, transposition, etc—then finding harmonically appropriate notes will not pose a problem. A “descent to a resting place” is a concept that can be picked up on in an intuitive, aural way. Sammut’s *Ameline* Variation can be understood not as a literal ornamentation of a *cantus firmus* as in the Caccini example, but as a *variation* on the more abstract properties of his theme: mood, color, direction, resolution. In the act of creation, Sammut’s ears were able to pick up on the creative implications of the Theme and respond accordingly in real-time.

Final Words

The present chapter, like the previous, has covered a great deal of information, beginning with simple improvisatory exercises and examples, ideas on how to practice harmonies and chord progressions, as well as balance the control between the hands. The development of the Left-hand Structure concept is central, as it informs an understanding of any of Sammut’s works and provides a mechanism for realizing multi-part improvisations as a solo marimbist. The examples from Sammut’s music demonstrate the variety and flexibility inherent in this approach to marimba performance, and the analyses of both *Caméléon* and *Ameline* have shown the analytic power and relevancy of these techniques, as well as provided a way to begin to understand Sammut’s music on a much deeper level. The *Ameline* example has shown a “big picture” approach to analyzing Sammut’s improvisations; now an even bigger picture will be explored—Sammut’s creative process, in terms of a practical application of

improvisation as well as the importance Sammut places on overall form and structure, and how improvisation fits into his overarching musical conception.

Chapter 5: Creative Process

As mentioned earlier, Sammut's creative process involves a balance between his intuitive, improvisational approach and a more structured, compositionally minded attitude. It is important to appreciate that improvisation and composition, while closely related, are not synonymous. Improvisation, as Bill Evans said, is "a certain process that's not an intellectual process." Improvisation relies on the development of *reflexes*, *muscle memory*, the relegation of musical mechanics to the *subconscious*—the unification of technique and theory as discussed above (see Chapter 2). Éric Sammut the improviser can use this process to generate ideas and react to inspiration, but it is Éric Sammut the composer that ultimately decides what to keep and what to discard, and formulates an overarching formal structure into which he can insert and adjust his improvisational ideas. The present chapter will explore the relationship between these two modes in Sammut's creative process, and will shed light on how he progresses from initial inspiration to a finished product. In other words, while the previous chapter dealt with how Sammut improvises, the following material explores how he *uses* improvisation to achieve his artistic goals.

Sammut's Compositional Process

Reacting to Inspiration

Éric Sammut's compositional process always begins with what he alternatively refers to as a feeling, an inspiration, an energy, or a color. This initial inspiration can be motivated by outside factors such as life experiences, or it can come as a direct result of experimentation on the instrument. Based on this initial inspiration, he begins formulating his ideas at the marimba. If he finds material that he really likes, he records it and puts it in his "idea library" for future reference. When he has material that he would like to develop into a full piece, he allows it to grow organically. As it develops, the process becomes more akin to a search than to a deliberate act of creation: "...I'm looking for something—I have an energy, an inspiration for something, but then I have to think about it." When he steps away from the instrument to go about his day, the music remains in the back of his mind, and when he re-approaches it

later, he allows his current feelings to guide the continuation of this search, which could send the music off in a new direction:

This is the way I compose—several approach[es]. Depending what I'm living during the day, how I wake up, what I feel... I don't push too much, I don't insist all the time. I just feel, OK, there is something [here], and then just let it [be] ...and then when I come back, like I said—one step more.¹

He points out that nearly half of the time, the search leads nowhere: the idea turns out to be a dead-end.

However, some ideas simply require more time and eventually come to fruition.

As an extreme example, he described his experience in composing *Stroboscope*. The musical material leading up to measure 48 was composed in a matter of a few days, but then he hit a dead-end and was unable to find the next step for the music. Each time he re-approached the piece, he hit this wall. During the subsequent months he composed other pieces, but *Stroboscope* remained unfinished. It was not until a year later that he found an inspiration to continue the piece in the form of a strobe light in a club in England, where he was relaxing with some students after performing a concert.² He captures this strobe light effect through the syncopated right hand part, the first instance of which occurs in mm. 48-57.

Example 5.1: Éric Sammut, *Stroboscope*, mm. 48–49: ‘Strobe light’ effect³



He reflected on the importance of patience in relation to inspiration regarding this experience:

We have to be patient. For Stroboscope, I just tried... one hundred ideas, but all wrong. But I was okay, I said, okay, maybe I will get it. I did something else, other compositions, other arrangements, and then one year [later], I got it. Fortunately it's not the case all the time.⁴

¹ Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

² Ibid.

³ *Stroboscope* by Éric Sammut: mm. 48–49. ©2000 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

⁴ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

The other end of the spectrum is represented by *Ameline*, which was written completely in one day, as an emotional reaction to the death of a friend's daughter.

*I don't know why but I went to the marimba, and in one day, I composed the piece completely. This is the fastest piece I composed, because I had really to say something, to express something. This is the only time I really needed to express about something really shocking.*⁵

The *Rotations* began more simply. The first *Rotation* grew out of rhythmic, rather than harmonic or melodic ideas. *Rotation 2* began as an improvisation in a particular key: "I remember I woke up one time and I just took the mallets and began to play in B Major..."⁶ For the third *Rotation* the initial concept was "[the] changing of harmony very fast. And, very strange harmony."⁷ Sammut considers the first and third *Rotations* to be closely related by their rhythmic energy, while in the second and fourth, "the melody is the leader."⁸ However, while he has remarked, "it's possible to consider the 4 *Rotations* like a suite,"⁹ they were not originally composed as interrelated pieces. The *Three Spirals*, in contrast, form one cohesive whole: "The *Spirals* are more connected than the *Rotations*."¹⁰

The Development of a Composition

As a new piece begins to take shape, Sammut becomes more concerned with the overall form and structure of the work rather than immediately focusing on the details. To continue the *Rotations* discussion above, he outlined his overall compositional strategy as follows: "For the *Rotations* I used first to mix some patterns with colors, [and] then developed colors in chords. After that I tried to structure the piece and develop with variations."¹¹ This remark reveals a step-by-step progression that can be extrapolated to many of his pieces: from physical sensation and "colors" (substitute "energy," "inspiration," or "feeling" as appropriate) to harmonic structure; from harmonic structure to large-scale form; and from form, to variations. The surface of the music—the particular ordering of notes as would

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sammut, "Seminar Clinic."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Suen, 44.

⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Sammut, "Seminar Interview."

¹¹ Suen, 42.

be found in the published score—is usually settled on much later, after he has performed the piece numerous times. At the 2014 Stevens Seminar, he premiered a new work titled *Blue Somewhere* during an evening concert. During his clinic the following day he emphasized the very fluid nature of this work, which had not yet reached a final, definite state.

*When I write a piece, I play maybe one thousand times differently... For example, I played a new piece yesterday, but it's not written yet... I will write it later, when I'm sure what notes I want to play. Now I'm not sure. I know for the structure, I know for the chords, but for the notes, not sure yet.*¹²

So, to summarize, Éric Sammut the improviser responds to inspiration and begins a composition. Éric Sammut the composer then takes over, making decisions about harmony, form, overall progression. Éric Sammut the improviser then takes this framework and uses it as a vehicle for variations. Then finally, Éric Sammut the composer makes final decisions about the surface details, arriving at a publishable score. This is the balance of intuition and intellect, of improvisation and composition, referred to earlier. His compositional process begins with the most vague and abstract conception (a “feeling”) that gradually comes into focus through a series of stages, arriving finally at a concrete, specified, complete piece of music. Sammut rarely speaks of first developing a theme or motive and later building the piece around it—it is usually the other way around. He first builds a musical structure, and gradually the themes, motives, and other details reveal themselves.

In his own compositions, Sammut prefers music that expresses contrasting moods or personalities. He refers to *Caméléon* and *Ameline* as particularly representative examples, while noting that the *Rotations* are less developed and make use of less contrast because of their smaller structures:

*I like pieces when I can express different faces. Like black and white or something like this. Never just one face, but [the] double face of my personality... Rotations are more like one face—even if the form is ABA all the time, it's quite compact in terms of style. But Caméléon is very different. Ameline is different because of the harmony. Quite [a lot of] distortion for a long while, and at the end I keep the same figures but transform it with joy.*¹³

¹² Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

¹³ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

This “transformation with joy” can be seen in the coda of *Ameline*, where the original theme that was looked at closely in the previous chapter is finally stated in A major, at a slower tempo. This transformation is meant to “introduce some hope at the end, you know? Because I need it. It's human—you cannot stay on the poor things of life, you know, you have to survive.”¹⁴ An excerpt from this transformation can be seen below. Compare this to the original statement as presented in Example 4.32 above.

Example 5.2: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 164–167: “Transformation with Joy”¹⁵

Tranquillo ♩ = 88

A C#7(#9) D(#11) F#7

1/[5,3]LS 1/[7,#9]LS (b9) 1/[5,9]LS [1,3]LP

The *Ameline* coda represents Sammut’s compositional mind at work. The transformation of key, mood, and tempo are decisions made for aesthetic and emotional reasons. The bass line, which moved predominantly in fourths in the original statement, now moves primarily in ascending thirds, and while he still makes use of a pivot note, this voice no longer remains on one pitch but rather moves up and down in small steps. This results in more activity in all the voices: the emotionally ‘shocked’ feeling at the beginning finally begins to come back to life as the piece nears its closure. The final measures avoid any definite resolution, fading out on a suspended E chord (V in A major) with a metrically ambiguous, polymetric pattern, leaving the listener with a poignant sense of uncertainty as the music gradually disappears.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Ameline* by Éric Sammut: mm. 164–167. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 5.3: Éric Sammut, *Ameline*, mm. 201–203¹⁶



Improvisation, Composition, and Performance

Because of Sammut’s compositional process, his improvisational approach to the marimba is intimately connected to his music—one might say improvisation is ‘built in’ to each piece. In performance, he can choose to play the finalized version, as he often does, but he is also free to alter the surface of the music to whatever degree he wishes, because improvisation—playing variations—was how he arrived at this surface in the first place. He does not first write a piece, and then later decide to learn how to improvise on it. Neither does he merely improvise some music, record it, and then notate it later for publication. For Sammut, the relationship between improvisation and composition is subtler than this. They continually feed off each other, even after a piece is published, which is why his live performances of his own pieces often differ to some degree from the scores. He considers the harmonies and structure of a piece to be the most important elements of the music, holding this attitude even with regards to the music of other composers:

More and more I can feel composers, they wrote some notes. But it could [have been] different notes. Like Bach, for example: [sings opening of Cello Prelude in G]. It could be [sings a variation on it]. Because he wrote for the cello, he wrote [sings original] but if he wrote for clarinet, maybe, [sings differently]. So I can feel that more and more. Even in symphonic music—[the] composer just chose some notes, but [they] could be different notes. This [(the notes)] is not the more important. More important is the harmony and the structure, and the direction of the music, where it's going. The notes are just pretext. The notes could be different. But we need to open the mind to understand this way to play.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ameline* by Éric Sammut: mm. 201–203. ©2010 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

¹⁷ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

It is important to remember that this attitude, this ‘open mind,’ is the result of a long developmental process throughout his twenty-year career as a solo performer. Recall his remark, shared in Chapter 2, that at the beginning of his career, performing “...was more in my head. But now, it’s more in my ear. I just play.”¹⁸ He allows his ear to guide him. Just as his ears guide him during his harmonic exercises and transposition, he allows his ears to guide the performance of his own music, and the music of other composers. In this way, his focus during performance can be more open—he is aware of the larger experience of the music, rather than on the details of execution. He made an analogy to the familiar act of driving, first in a closed way, and then in an open way.

*The notes are [like] when you drive, you just look at the road, maybe. Or maybe you just look at your hands, driving. This is the notes. No, you have to open your mind, your eyes, [and] your ears, [to the] people in the car, and [to] the mountains around [you], and [to the] sun. Concentrate, of course, but driving—we know about it... Also, all my practicing is in this way. I'm practicing in [an] open way. Even if I'm playing a piece written, from the repertory—I just all the time try to feel more than to do something. I feel first.*¹⁹

He acknowledges that even when he is performing a pre-composed piece as written, he tries to feel *as if* he were improvising. Even when performing a more abstract, contemporary piece such as Tanaka’s *Two Movements for Marimba*, he is able to maintain this open feeling: “...if I have to play contemporary music now, I don't play in the same way [as I did] before. I just try to play *music*, try to [express] emotion, like improvisation sometimes, even if it's written.”²⁰

When it comes to other people performing and interpreting his compositions, Sammut holds an equally open mindset. In an interview he once remarked, “I’m not opposed to people experimenting and even changing some notes to find their own interpretation.”²¹ Although he always approaches his music in a flexible way, he does not consider it a requirement. When asked directly if he would encourage people to improvise on his pieces, he responded in a very supportive way: “Yeah, if you need to, if you feel you

¹⁸ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

¹⁹ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pfeiffer, 34.

want to do it, of course, I completely agree, I'm completely open for that. Just do it if you feel it.”²²

Improvisation, then, remains a live option for anyone studying his music. His compositions can be performed as written, or they can be treated as vehicles for exploring improvisation—Sammut considers either approach appropriate.

Sammut's Arranging Process

One of the most unique aspects of Sammut's creative output is the large number of arrangements he has written over the years: nearly half of his published solo marimba works are actually arrangements of operatic, orchestral, or popular pieces. Because arrangements by definition begin with another composer's work, Sammut's arranging process differs from his compositional process, particularly in the beginning stages. The end result is very similar, however: Sammut applies his style and technique, and understands the structure of the piece on a deep level. Just as his compositions go through many improvisatory stages as they are developed, so do his arrangements. In discussing his arranging method, Sammut prioritizes structural balance and variety, and provides an even more complete picture of his musical mind at work.

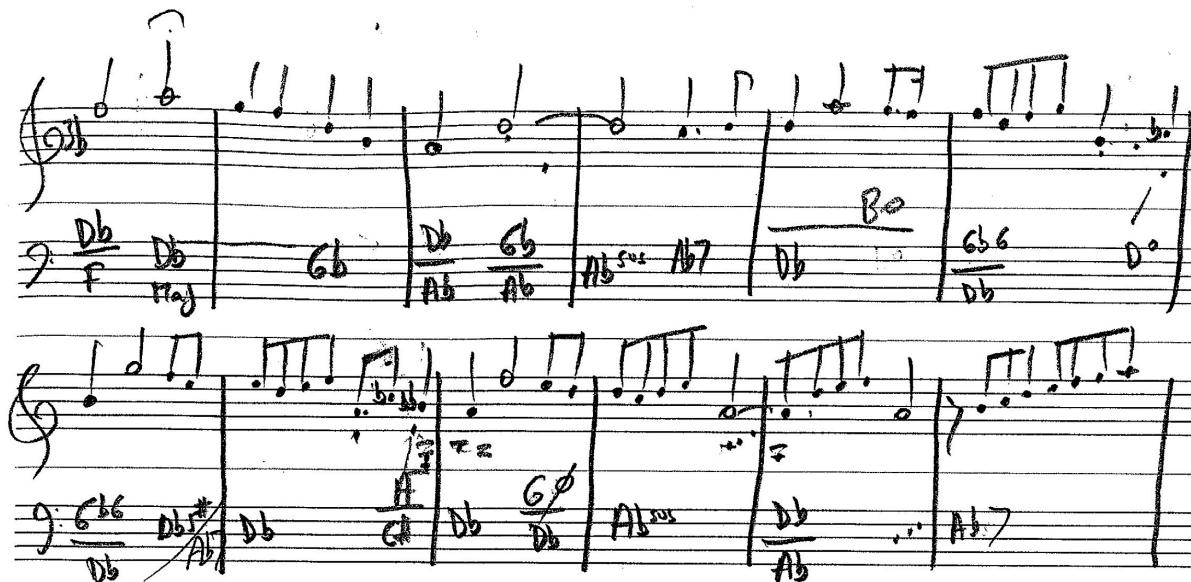
Building an Arrangement

While his compositions are begun with a form of outside inspiration or experimentation, Sammut's arrangements stem from his being drawn to a particular piece. Once he has decided on a piece to arrange, the first step is to learn the melody, as well as the chords—the structure—by ear. “Most of the time, I just do by ear. I just first get the melody with the chords... [M]ost of the time I don't write it, but when I have to do it faster... I need to write.”²³ An example of a “written” arrangement in this embryonic stage can be seen in the next example. This is an excerpt from Sammut's sketch of Bizet's *La Fleur Que Tu m'Avais Jetee*, which very much resembles a jazz lead-sheet. Thinking of the music in this way provides the three basic musical functions—melody, harmony, and bass—necessary to realize a complete musical picture in an improvisatory way.

²² Sammut, “Seminar Clinic.”

²³ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

Example 5.4: Bizet Sketch Excerpt²⁴



Sammur elaborates on his procedure for taking this sketch and bringing it to life as a solo marimba presentation, particularly in terms of meter:

[It's] like a jazz standard. So I wrote it in four, for example, like I hear the real arrangement—I just put down like the real singer is doing, like a transcription, very basic. Then the step after is to make it really expressive on the marimba, I mean sometimes I just play some bar in three, sometimes in four... if I do it all in four, it's too academic, and it's not enough alive. Sometimes [the meter is] longer, but most of the time shorter.²⁵

This comment highlights the importance of metric flexibility in Sammur's writing. In Chapter 2 it was revealed that Sammur improvises more freely when he does not feel tied to any particular meter: now it is clear that there is an aesthetic force guiding this metric freedom, even when he is arranging or composing. Metric freedom will be investigated on a much deeper level later in this chapter.

The sketch reveals another nuance in his arranging approach—notice the small, stemless noteheads peppered throughout this short excerpt, sometimes written as an alto line, sometimes as a tenor line. Based on the original piece, but again picked up on aurally rather than by consulting a score, Sammur incorporates various countermelodies and obbligato parts as he deems necessary:

²⁴ Given to me in PDF format at the Seminar Interview

²⁵ Ibid.

This is the rhythm the orchestra is playing [pointing to the secondary voices]... Yeah, sometimes I had some important, I feel important line, like this line... I'm almost sure I will use it. You have the main melody, and inside you have another melody sometimes—but [it's] less important. Most of the time I use my [own material], but sometimes, I like really this [countermelody] and I want to use it. So I just wrote like this. Just [a] few of them.²⁶

In most cases, Sammut does not bother with this sketch stage and jumps right into improvisational work at the marimba: “...for the Puccini [*Musetta's Waltz*], for example, I didn't use any writing for that. Just played. Or Prokofiev [*Dance of the Knights*] also, I didn't write it down.”²⁷

At this point in the process, Sammut has all the basic information he needs to begin developing the arrangement into a performance-ready work. He emphasizes the importance of finding a way to make the piece expressive on the marimba specifically. Thus begins the ‘digestion’ stage, mirroring his compositional process: he continually re-approaches the piece in an improvisatory way as the details gradually come into focus.

...and then I have to find the good energy to play it, to do my style, and to express with the instrument—what can I do with this? I can't play like a piano, I have to play marimba with this. And then, it takes time to digest it, to do like cooking, you know? And to experiment [with] some phrasing and also to do variations—not to play the same all the time. Structure—rolls, but not too much. Octaves, but not too much. So it's like cooking, you know—onions, pepper, tomatoes. Structure. With my arrangements, [as] with my pieces, structure is very important. Beginning, development, and end. It looks easy but it takes time.²⁸

This remark highlights, once again, the balance between Sammut’s improvisational and compositional, or in this case arranging, mindsets. He is able to experiment with the structure of the music and play variations, while taking into consideration the overall layout of the arrangement and the total effect of the presentation. It is here that his arranging and compositional processes converge as he begins to apply his specific approach to playing the marimba, incorporating idiomatic techniques and exploiting the textural and expressive potential of the instrument. In this way, the structural and emotional content of the music drives the technical aspects of the arrangement or composition, rather than the other way around.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Before proceeding to Sammut's live improvisations, his ideas about meter and form will be investigated more deeply. Sammut's use of flexible meter (his avoidance of sounding "too academic") is a unique feature of his playing, based not on some arbitrary selection of time signatures but rather on the resonance of the instrument itself. Out of this springs two more important aspects of his music: the rhythmic placement of bass notes, and the realization of unmetered textures that he frequently uses during live improvisation. Ultimately all of this happens within a form, and Sammut's ideas about form include an awareness of the flow and development of an arrangement or composition, as well as the use of variations as a formal unit—as a part of the form itself. Finally, it will be seen how Sammut applies these ideas on a larger scale: entire arrangements defining formal units, and structural elements spanning entire concerts. The goal of Sammut's art is musical communication: while improvisation plays a central role in Sammut's musicianship, he is ultimately more concerned with the overall quality and effect of this communication than with the employment of improvisation as an end unto itself.

Meter

Meter as a Function of Resonance

The marimba is a resonant instrument, but this resonance is limited: depending on the quality of the instrument and the acoustic of the venue, once the bars are struck they have a short sustain and then the sound disappears. Recall from Chapter 2 Sammut's comment about feeling free to improvise when there is a "minimum of resonance." He elaborates: "If the acoustic is no good, I can't [improvise]. I could, but I [would] have no pleasure."²⁹ During a performance Sammut is always aware of his sound in the hall, and makes adjustments in real-time to accommodate the acoustic. There can be as much as a ten-minute difference in program length depending on the acoustic, because if the space is dry he has to play faster.³⁰ This aural awareness has direct bearing on Sammut's use of meter in his compositions, arrangements, and improvisation. Reflecting on his frequent use of odd time signatures, he remarked, "I use a lot of asymmetrical bars, because if I play too much academic, we can feel we miss resonance on

²⁹ Sammut, "The Paris Interviews Part 3."

³⁰ Sammut, "Seminar Interview."

the marimba.”³¹ His goal is “to have the sensation all the time we have the bass in the ear” and “to be sure the sound is present all the time. No holes, too much. Or, if [there is a] hole it's because I want [it].”³² Comparing this to his remark above, that in arranging, his time signatures are usually shorter than the original, a principle is revealed: Sammut’s priority is to have a full sound and a complete blend of melody, harmony, and bass, as often as possible. Because the sound of the marimba decays quickly, more notes must be struck more often to give the illusion of sustain. Flexibility of meter not only gives his music a distinctive flow, but more importantly, enables a refined control of sound on an instrument that, in reality, provides minimal options in this regard.

This principle of continuous sound explains why, when properly performed, even passages in his music that rapidly shift between time signatures feel smooth and continuous—in a counterintuitive way, the shifting meter is what makes the music sound smooth and connected. If every measure were squared off to an equal number of beats, this would often result in “holes” in the sound that could only be eliminated through contrived repetition or rolls. Take for instance the now-familiar opening measures of *Caméléon*. This music is marked at a tempo of 112–116 to the half note. The opening measure is stated in 4/2 (or 16/8), and is followed by the following time signatures through the end of the first large phrase (up to and including measure 11): 11/8; 4/2 (16/8); 2/2 (8/8); 10/8; 15/8; 10/8; 13/8; 9/8. Each measure consists of one bass note that occurs either on the downbeat or on an eighth note anticipation, followed by harmony as realized through the use of a rotation interval, with melodic and harmonic material in the right hand. The texture is linear: there is a constant stream of eighth notes throughout the passage without a single break, and only rarely do the hands play simultaneously. The dotted quarter note is the longest notated rhythmic value, occurring sometimes in the left hand and sometimes in the right—and the latter two (of the three) eighth notes are always stated in the opposite hand. No hand ever plays more than two consecutive eighth notes. Each melodic statement blossoms out of this perpetual texture, shimmers for a moment, and recedes back into the ongoing harmonic fabric, like a splash of bright paint over a darker

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

background. The meter supports each melodic arc, and as soon as the melody has reached its destination, the music moves on. The following shows a very stark example of how the first four measures of *Caméléon* would look if the meter remained in the initial 4/2 signature.

Example 5.5: Éric Sammut, *Caméléon*, mm. 1–4: Unchanging Meter³³

Of course it would be possible for Sammut to eliminate the gaps at the end of the second and fourth measures by playing accompanimental “filler” material (like a pianist playing countermelodies between phrases when accompanying a singer), but this is essentially the function of the first and third measures: they state the harmony in an accompanimental way preceding and between the melodic (and as was discussed previously, motivic) statements. Maintaining the 4/2 signature and adding additional accompaniment material solely for the sake of the meter is partly what Sammut means when referring to the music being too “academic.”

Another solution to the gaps in the previous example would be to play a longer melody, which could be done in two ways. The first way would be to literally add more notes to the melody, but this is another contrived, “academic” solution, sacrificing motivic integrity and melodic flow in the name of meter. The second way would be to play longer note values, if it were possible. One could imagine the harmonies being sustained by a pianist, or strings, while a vocalist or wind instrumentalist plays the

³³ *Cameleon* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–4. ©2009 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

written melody, stretching the note values to fill the entire measure. This could in fact work, but not in the context of solo marimba: the notes decay and disappear quickly—when melodic motion ceases, so does the sound. Interestingly, Sammut has in fact arranged and recorded a version of *Caméléon* for solo marimba accompanied by a string quartet.³⁴ The marimba part remains unchanged, and the strings generally fill in the chords behind it. The effect is a very colorful, vibrant sound, however because the strings are capable of true sustain rather than decaying resonance, each change in meter is very audible—the mystery of Sammut’s meter is partially lost in exchange for the added color and richness of the quartet. The meter is truly a byproduct of the original medium: solo marimba.

Expressive Bass Placement

Closely related to this discussion of meter and resonance is Sammut’s use and placement of bass notes. He summarizes his thoughts on the realization of bass lines in solo arrangements in terms of sound, but also in terms of expression, shedding further light on his artistry:

Most of the time, arrangements are more like [piano] arrangements, and on the marimba it [doesn't work] so well because we need to repeat often the bass. [Repetitive, predictable bass lines] are not the way I feel for the music. I feel more like, [when] I want to play the bass, I play the bass. I don't play [it] on the beat all the time.... I play when I feel. I think it's more marimbistic, because the chords, and the melody, and the bass—we don't know exactly [where they will fall]. It's more poetic, and more expressive. Because, if we play all the time the bass on the beat, some people can think 'Oh, it's a pity you have not a pedal!' ...So, for this reason, I play the bass sometimes on the beat, sometimes not. In this way, we need to listen [to] the music differently. It's not predictable.

The heart of his writing style is found in the statement: “It’s more poetic, and more expressive...we need to listen to the music differently.” This is certainly one aspect of what Leigh Howard Stevens meant when he recalled hearing “a new kind of marimba music that had never been heard before” (see Chapter 1). Sammut very frequently anticipates a change in harmony by placing the bass note an eighth note ahead of the bar line, as can be seen in many of the *Caméléon* examples presented previously. Of course, sometimes the bass falls on the beat, and sometimes it actually falls later—see *Italian Song* (Example

³⁴ Éric Sammut, Jean-Pascal Beintus, and Pablo de Sarasate, *Mirages: Cordes et Lames*, compact disc, (Asbury Park, NJ: Resonator Records, 2007).

4.20) for a very explicit example of a delayed bass line. Typically, Sammut only plays one bass note per change in harmony, allowing it to resonate and decay underneath the ensuing harmonic and melodic material, unless the harmonic rhythm is slow enough to warrant a re-stated pitch. This directly correlates with his use of shifting meters discussed previously—once the bass note has decayed, another bass note needs to be sounded in order to maintain the complete three-dimensional aural picture. Usually the bass is anticipated by placing it at the end of each melodic statement, jumpstarting the next harmony. Then the process repeats itself: the bass decays, the melody blossoms, and just before the listener becomes aware of the emptiness in the texture, a new bass note triggers the next phrase.

The constant decay and restatement of the bass gives Sammut another expressive tool to manipulate: the longer he waits before sounding the next bass note, the more tension he can build up, and the greater the sense of ‘release’ when the next bass note finally arrives. This is one aspect of what Sammut means in the previous quote when he refers to playing bass notes “when I feel”—the balance of tension and release exist metrically (as an effect of resonance) as well as harmonically. In textures with regularly (predictably) sounding bass notes, this particular tension does not exist. Again, see *Italian Song*, which is written in a steady 6/8. Although the bass notes are delayed, they occur regularly in every measure, deliberately resulting in a very calm, relaxed feeling throughout. The opening of the second and fourth *Rotations* provides another example of regularly occurring bass notes.

There is another hallmark of Sammut’s bass placement that can only be picked up on when seeing him play live. Very frequently, when he notates a double stop between the bass note and the melody, he actually plays this as a subtle flam by placing the bass note slightly early. The bass note is not played as a true grace note—it is played at full volume. There is simply a slight separation of attack between the hands, resulting in an unmetred anticipation. The effect is that the boundaries between beats and bar lines become blurred, resulting in a sense of unpredictability even when the music is written in a straightforward manner. Rather than taking what he might consider a more “academic” approach of playing each double-stop perfectly together, he takes advantage once again of the resources of the instrument itself: if the bass is anticipated, it will resonate and support the proceeding notes, but will

disappear sooner than if it was placed on the downbeat or delayed, ultimately creating heightened tension at the end of the phrase. Additionally, a true double stop becomes an effect rather than a rule to follow. There is as much flexibility in his placement of the bass notes as there is in his use of meter in general. All of this comes together in a unique and expressive manner in live performance, and especially during his improvisations.

The Unmetered Linear Texture

During improvisation, Éric Sammut sometimes takes the idea of metric freedom a step further. Rather than freely changing meters to accommodate the music, he can simply do away with any real sense of meter and replace it with a gentle pulse. The number of notes per chord or per measure is completely open and flexible, but there remains a relatively stable harmonic rhythm, which is to say, it is possible to “conduct” along with his playing and anticipate when the harmonies will change. Within this framework there is a lot of give and take—sometimes harmonies are shortened or lengthened for expressive purposes, but this is done on a phrase-by-phrase basis and does not relate back to any fixed meter. This effect will be referred to as an *unmetered linear texture*, which differentiates it from the other textures dealt with so far: strictly vertical textures (*Patate Rag*), metered linear textures (the opening section of *Caméléon*), polyrhythmic textures (portions of the *First Rotation*), and contrametric textures (the improvisatory section of *Indifference*). This texture is essentially rubato in nature, however it can be differentiated from simply playing music in a rubato fashion. One would play a metered rhythm in a rubato tempo by adjusting the amount of time between each note. The notes might speed up, or slow down, depending on the music, but the meter would remain intact while length of and time between notes was manipulated. In Sammut’s unmetered linear texture, the speed of the notes may be changed, but this has less bearing on the amount of time given to each harmony—he is not thinking of speeding up or slowing down a particular rhythmic subdivision, but rather, of increasing or decreasing the density of each measure, harmony, or throughout a phrase.

Transcribing such a performance creates a paradox: the more accurately one attempts to notate the music in terms of mathematically precise rhythmic timing and phrasing, the less accurately the

notation represents the true flow of the music. Sammut commented that it is impossible to capture every detail of his music in notation.³⁵ As an introduction to Sammut's live improvisations, and to the notation style that will be used when presenting transcriptions of his unmetered performances, see the example on the following page, a sixteen measure variation on the structure to the A section of *Danny Boy*.³⁶ This is not an extreme example as many of the measures are in a true 4/4 meter, but there are some exceptions. A slash on the stem of a bass note indicates a flammed anticipation as discussed previously. Occasionally a specific rhythm is written into the music, such as the triplets that occur in measures one, four, and six, and the fanning beams in measure two. The tempo is indicated as a half-note pulse. As usual, the music is accompanied by chord symbols as well as a reduction showing the left-hand structures and fundamental melodic motion.

³⁵ Sammut, "Seminar Clinic."

³⁶ I personally witnessed Sammut learning this structure by ear. I performed my own personal arrangement of *Danny Boy* for him at the beginning of our lessons in Paris. As we began to discuss the arrangement, and improvisation in general, he requested that I play the A section for him again so he could "learn the structure." After this repeated hearing, he picked up his mallets and began to demonstrate his concepts. His knowledge of the *structure* quickly surpassed my own—he did not play my arrangement note-for-note, but he was able to improvise on the harmonies immediately. As the lesson progressed it became obvious that I was so focused on my own 'notes' that I had not thoroughly mastered the structure—I was able to play my arrangement but was unable to improvise variations with any level of confidence. An important lesson, and a case in point regarding his comment, shared earlier, that the notes are just "pretext."

Example 5.6: Danny Boy Variation and the Unmetered Linear Texture³⁷

Danny Boy Variation
♩ = 74

mf

poco rit.

f

(Assist.)

(Assist.)

(Assist.)

p

This transcription represents a real-time application of many of Sammut’s techniques and concepts. The unmetered texture will be seen in other contexts in the following chapter, but before this, one more topic needs to be discussed: Sammut’s ideas about form.

³⁷ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 1.”

Form

Expressing Form Through Rhythm

Sammut strives to express form in all of his music. While structure and form are related, they are not one in the same. Structure primarily refers to the harmonic content—the chords—of a piece. Form is the organizing principle that contains this structure. Sammut is particularly careful to think about form when arranging. On the marimba, and especially at the beginning stages of learning to arrange, it is tempting to lock into a particular texture or approach and use this exclusively to realize the structure of a piece. For instance, the rubato unmeasured texture explored in the previous section is a great tool for musical exploration—one can linger on each harmony, really getting to know the sound and progression of the chords and their relationship to the melody. This is a good starting point for anyone wishing to begin arranging on the marimba. However, using this approach exclusively provides very little in the way of contrast and development. Sammut feels that for an arrangement to feel complete, there must be contrast, and he emphasizes rhythmic contrast in particular.

If I have to play just one theme, I will introduce some rhythm sometimes... At the beginning of my career, I was playing just like this [exclusively rubato], and I [felt] no feedback from the people. I feel I finish and people [don't react strongly]. I was feeling as something unfinished... And then I tried to introduce something more rhythmic—just one part of the arrangement.³⁸

He even went so far as to say, “I don't know why but this is the rule of the arrangement on the marimba: We have to sometimes introduce something [rhythmic].”³⁹

As a strong example of applying this rhythmic contrast, he turned to one of his arrangements, *Musetta's Waltz* from Puccini's *La Boheme*. The original (which begins at No. 21 in Act II) is essentially a slow waltz that follows a simple rondo-like form: A-B-A-C-A, with an orchestral coda at the end. The tempo picks up during the C section (marked *appena animando* in the score) but maintains a waltz feel. Sammut's arrangement demonstrates his creativity in action, especially when compared to his recording as found on *Four-Mallet Ballet*. His recorded performance is considerably different from his published

³⁸ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

³⁹ Ibid.

score, representing a prime example of how his improvisational approach to the marimba leads to many versions of his pieces. The greatest differences can be found in the opening section of the arrangement. Sammut follows the form of the original work exactly, except the opening A section is treated as a rubato improvisation over the harmonic structure, rather than launching directly into the waltz as in the original. The opening measures of Sammut's score are written in 4/4, however his recorded performance gives no hint of any particular meter. The harmonic changes do not correspond with the bar lines or the 4/4 meter in any consistent way. Sammut's opening section consists of eleven measures of 4/4, capped off with one measure of 5/4 as the final phrase comes to rest on a low E. These twelve measures correspond to the same harmonic structure as the sixteen measures of waltz time found in mm. 30–45. The 4/4 signature is only used to simplify reading the score.

After the improvised introduction, Sammut's arrangement moves into the B section at measure 13 with a strong melody, and a gentle waltz feel. Sammut commented that this section, rhythmically, is *between* the flowing rubato of the introduction, and a more rhythmically driving texture. While there is a clear feeling of three beats per measure, there is still a fair amount of pushing and pulling during his performance. At measure 27, this waltz feel disintegrates completely, as his score returns to the 4/4 signature and transitions back into a free rubato to close out the section. The A section returns at measure 30, but this time Sammut does not freely improvise, but rather states and embellishes the original melody. Although this section is written in 3/4, it is treated in a rubato fashion, captured in mm. 30–32 through the use of fermatas and a breath mark, followed by sweeping chordal figures as in measures 33, 37, and 41.

Section C, which spans measure 46 through the downbeat of measure 70, corresponds to the *appena animando* section in the original. Here Sammut picks up the tempo, but also transforms the music rhythmically. The meter is 4/4, and Sammut gives the music a strong, dancing Bolero feel. As he commented, "...Bolero, even in Puccini!"⁴⁰ This section lends a great rhythmic contrast to the rubato improvisation, and the quasi-waltz tempo found in the earlier sections. For Sammut, it is this section that

⁴⁰ Ibid.

makes this arrangement complete. “This is why I think the arrangement is good... I could play [the C section in a rubato tempo]—But then at the end, the people [won’t respond]. Unfinished, you know?”⁴¹ It is this diversity in rhythm that keeps the listener’s attention and makes for a satisfying musical experience. Sammut also points out that using rhythmic contrast “shows another aspect of the instrument.”⁴² His rhythmic ideas are one more example of how he takes full advantage of the potential of the marimba in his writing and playing.

Expressing Form Through Register

In addition to generating formal contrast through rhythm and time, Sammut also highlights the importance of manipulating register. If an arrangement generally remains in one register of the instrument for its duration, this results in a lack of contrast that has a similar effect to the lack of rhythmic contrast explored previously. Sammut recommends exploring the highest and lowest registers of the marimba and incorporating them into arrangements to exploit this potential contrast. For example, if a passage is repeated, it can be effective to use the middle range of the marimba the first time, and drop the bass notes down to the lowest octave on the repeat. (His exercises help to develop the ability to comfortably navigate a wide tessitura on the instrument—see Example 3.12, Exercise 6B: Global Vision (two octaves), as well as Example 4.15, Left-hand Structure Development Step 3.) He points out that using the lowest range of the marimba is more possible “if you take more time, more rubato.”⁴³ Of using the highest octaves of the instrument, he commented, “Also you can [play] there in the high [register]—it’s very cute to play there. Each concert I’m going there one time. I stay there, you know? When I arranged Prokofiev—it’s *Aubade*—I was getting there. And also, the end of the third *Spiral*.”⁴⁴

Sammut’s arrangement of Prokofiev’s *Aubade* from *Romeo and Juliette* is a tour de force example of using the full range of the marimba to create variety and contrast. This short arrangement spans the entire marimba, from the lowest C to the highest B, one pitch shy of covering the entire five-

⁴¹ Ibid.

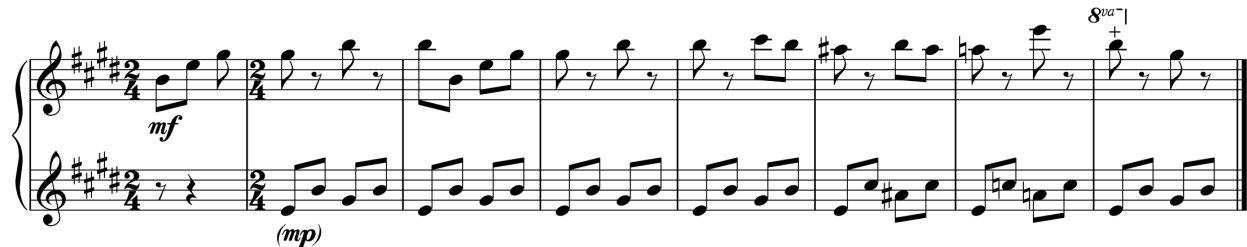
⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

octave range. The opening of the theme is written in a high register with both hands in the treble clef. In measure 15, the right hand reaches up to the highest octave of the instrument to play a B with the shaft of the mallet (indicated in the score by a + sign).

Example 5.7: Éric Sammut, *Aubade*, mm. 9–15⁴⁵



This section of the music, comprising mm. 9–40, briefly settles on pitch E3 after a flourish, and is then repeated verbatim. In the next section, beginning at measure 73, the left hand bass notes drop an octave to this same lower E more regularly:

Example 5.8: Éric Sammut, *Aubade*, mm. 73–76⁴⁶

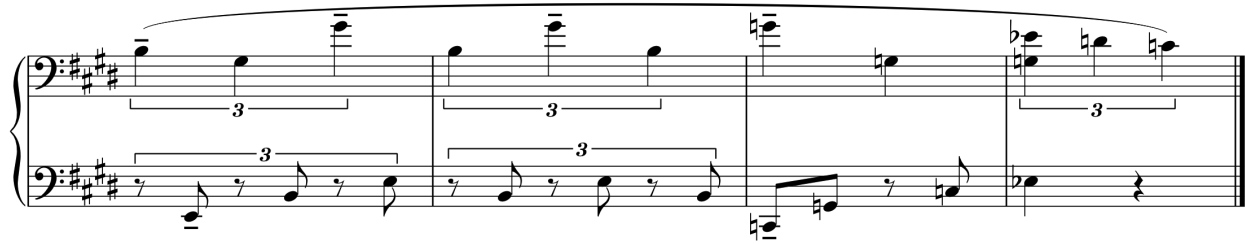


This “B” material is then repeated, but in the lowest range of the marimba, with both hands in the bass clef and a quarter-note triple rhythm giving the music a much broader feel and sound. In this way, the passage provides an example of simultaneous rhythmic and registral contrast.

⁴⁵ *Aubade* by Éric Sammut: mm. 9–15. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

⁴⁶ *Aubade* by Éric Sammut: mm. 73–76. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

Example 5.9: Éric Sammut, *Aubade*, mm. 85–88⁴⁷



Over the course of the arrangement, the music gradually steps downward, stretching to the low C in the third measure of Example 5.9. After this lowest statement, the A section is repeated once more in the high register, followed by the mid-range B material and a coda. The low material shown in Example 5.9 only occurs once, making it a significant landmark within the form of the piece.

Variation as a Formal Unit

It has been seen how Sammut uses improvisation to generate ideas and gradually arrive at finalized versions of his compositions and arrangements, and also how his improvisational approach to the marimba informs his performances. Sammut also uses improvisation as a formal device. In other words, some of his arrangements feature sections that are invariably improvised in his performances. One of these was seen in the Puccini example—the introduction of this arrangement is not merely embellished in an improvisational way, but is by definition an improvised section of the piece. Improvisation is built into his arrangement. This same concept is found in *Variations on Porgy and Bess*. The passage from measure 152–183 is by definition an improvised section. Although as with the Puccini example he has a particular realization notated in the score, in performance this section of the arrangement is always significantly different.⁴⁸ The chord symbols and left hand structures for this section are shown in the following example. A “blank” measure indicates a repeated harmony. The “LS” and “LP” designations are not included.

⁴⁷ *Aubade* by Éric Sammut: mm. 85–88. ©2008 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

⁴⁸ I have seen Sammut perform this work live two different times. Each time he played a very different improvisation, and they were both different from the version in the score.

Example 5.10: Improvisation Structure for *Variations on Porgy and Bess* mm. 152–183

The image displays two staves of musical notation, each representing a sequence of chords and their corresponding improvisation structures. The first staff contains 12 measures with the following chords and structures: Em (1/5/3), Bm7 (1/7/3), Em (1/5/3), Bm7 (1/7/3), Em (1/5/3), Bm7 (1/7/3), Em (1/5/8), Am9 (1/5/[9]), Cmaj7 (1/[7]), B (1/[5]), F#m7 (1/[5]), and B7 (1/[5]). The second staff contains 15 measures with the following chords and structures: Em (1/5/8), Bm7 (1/7/3), Em (1/[5]), Bm7 (1/[7]), Em (1/[5]), Bm7 (1/[7]), Em (1/5), A7 (1/[7]), Gmaj9 (1/7/9), Em7 (1/5/8), A7 (1/7/3), D7(sus4) (1/[7]), Em (1/5/8), Bm7 (1/[7]), and Em (1/[3]).

The number of measures, as well as the harmonic structure, remains intact when Sammut performs this piece, but the right hand is changed significantly. This is a good example of Sammut’s advice to keep the left hand almost the same and vary the right.

The significance of this is that Sammut is able to extend formal possibilities by including *variations* as a defined part of his arrangements. The placement and structure of these sections becomes another compositional component. As in the example above, the structure of the variation can be unique to the piece—this particular sequence of chords only occurs during these measures, in contrast to the improvised introduction to *Musetta’s Waltz*, where the improvisation occurs over a preexisting section of the work. The left hand of the *Porgy* improvisation also provides another example of registral manipulation: notice the low E seven measures from the end, which corresponds to the climax of this short section.

Nested Forms

Just as Sammut can develop formal variety in his compositions and arrangements, he can organize music on an even larger scale by combining individual pieces into multi-part presentations. One of these was witnessed at his performance during the 2014 Leigh Howard Stevens seminar. The closing piece to his concert was *Le Velo*, a composition by his former teacher, François Dupin. The piece features fast running lines, quickly changing harmony, and a lot of energy as it depicts a bicycle ride (*le velo* is French for “the bike”). It would have made a perfectly appropriate closing number to the concert on its own, but Sammut made the performance of his late teacher’s piece even more special: before he

performed the piece, he announced to the audience that he would improvise during a portion of the performance. As the piece nears its end, there is a short passage (mm. 92–93) that slows down and decrescendos on a G9 chord (the dominant of C), before abruptly returning to the initial tempo and sprinting to the end with a dramatic crescendo. It is here, after the ritardando and diminuendo but before the jump back to the faster tempo, that Sammut inserted his improvised section. This improvisation turned out to be a short but complete arrangement of the Walter Gross jazz standard *Tenderly*, in the key of C. The arrangement consisted of a brief introduction, an improvisational statement of the complete theme, a variation on the complete structure of the tune, and finally a transition back to the G chord, all in an unmetred rubato tempo. Sammut incorporated various short passages from *Le Velo* into his improvisation. At the end of the arrangement, he jumped back into the original *Le Velo* tempo and played a slightly extended version of the ending of the piece.

Sammut later pointed out that he always improvises a separate tune within the context of *Le Velo*. He chooses a tune based on where he is performing: “When I play [*Le Velo*] in different countries, if I play *Le Velo* for example in France, I will choose a [well-known] French song... and I'm doing [*Tenderly*] because... I wanted to play something from your country [the United States].”⁴⁹ He also later pointed out that, because *Tenderly* was included as part of a larger presentation, it did not have to incorporate rhythmic contrast—*Le Velo* itself provided this contrast.

*I played a piece, you know, Le Velo. So, it was very rhythmical, very technical. And then, to have something like a dream, I just decided to play [Tenderly]. I don't need here to get some rhythm on Tenderly, because it's part of [a bigger thing]. But if I had to, I would... Depending [on] the context.*⁵⁰

So Sammut frequently combines pieces into larger musical statements. His *Le Velo* performance included an arrangement of *Tenderly*, which itself included a variation. This form-within-a-form concept was taken to the extreme during his Showcase Concert at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in 2009, in Indianapolis, IN. The concert was a project he had put together over the

⁴⁹ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

⁵⁰ Sammut, “The Paris Interviews Part 3.”

preceding six months titled “Baby Come Bach,” and was comprised of five parts, each part being made up of three or four pieces performed together without a break. Each set included one piece by J. S. Bach, and other selections in the same or a parallel key. Sammut performed his piece, *Snake’s Dream*, on its own “to do a transition from D to E.”⁵¹ He also played a new, untitled piece as an encore, which had only been written two weeks prior to the concert and was dedicated to Leigh Howard Stevens. The organization of the entire concert is listed in the following table.

Table 5.1: Éric Sammut’s PASIC 2009 Showcase Concert⁵²

	Composers	Titles	Keys
Part I	J. S. Bach Henry Mancini Scott Joplin	Invention No. 9 The Days of Wine and Roses Elite Syncopation	F minor F major F major
Part II	J. S. Bach Antonio Carlos Jobim Sergei Rachmaninov The Beatles	Invention No. 4 Chega de Saudade (bridge) Third Concerto (principle theme) Julia	D minor D major D minor D major
Interlude	Éric Sammut	Snake’s Dream	Dm, Em
Part III	J. S. Bach Frederic Chopin Johnny Hallyday Consuelo Velazquez	Prelude No. 9 (WTC Book I) Prelude No. 4 Retiens La Nuit Besame Mucho	E major E minor E major E minor
Part IV	J. S. Bach Richard Strauss Éric Sammut	Invention No. 1 Four Last Songs (“Spring”) Rotation III	C major C minor C minor
Part V	Sting J. S. Bach Gordon Stout	Fragile Invention No. 13 Second Mexican Dance	A minor A minor A major
Encore	Éric Sammut	Untitled	Ab major

Sammut’s program consisted of pieces from many time periods, genres, styles, and composers. All of the pieces were Sammut’s personal transcriptions, adaptations, arrangements, and compositions.

⁵¹ Percussive Arts Society, “PASIC 2009 Éric Sammut Keyboard Showcase Concert.”

⁵² Ibid.

While the pieces in each part were related by parallel major and minor keys, the parts themselves were loosely based on “closely related keys”: F major to D minor; E minor to C major. The only stretch is the transition from Part IV to Part V—A minor is the relative minor of C major, but the final piece of Part IV is actually in C minor, although the harmony of third Rotation is actually quite ambiguous, only briefly suggesting C minor at the beginning and the end. The encore seems not to have been involved in this overall key structure. Sammut put much thought into the ordering and development of the program, to make sure it would be effective specifically at PASIC.

All pieces have to be challenging. Even if it's [a] soft piece, it [is] really important to have attention from the people. When [we play for a small audience] we have possibilities to play different[ly], but for PASIC, it's important to be sure of all—all notes, all pieces. And also, the rhythm of the program—the structure, I mean. Like a crescendo. Sometimes, crescendo, [then] less, [then] crescendo, and at the end, [explosion]. It's very important to think about it.⁵³

The only piece on the program that was originally written for marimba, other than Sammut's own compositions, was Gordon Stout's *Second Mexican Dance*. However, Sammut announced to the audience that he would improvise this as well. He did this by first embellishing the music in a fluid way, and then improvising variations over a left hand part extracted from the original score. He followed the form of the original exactly, until surprising the audience by launching into Paul Simon's *Mrs. Robinson* just before the end. This turned out to be yet another example of a nested arrangement, like his inclusion of *Tenderly* within *Le Velo*. In fact, this represented music-making on four simultaneous levels: the *Mrs. Robinson* arrangement was contained within his improvisational *Second Mexican Dance*, which itself was the third part of a three-piece group in the key of A, which was then itself the fifth part of a five-part program organized by key relationships. The program consisted of a balance between playing pre-written music and improvising, all held together by an overarching structural plan, making his PASIC concert one unified musical statement.

⁵³ Sammut, “Seminar Interview.”

Final Words

The present chapter has focused on Sammut's creativity not from a technical or theoretical point of view, but from a wider vantage point, looking at how he develops pieces and organizes his music, with the end goal of creating an effective experience for his audience. Improvisation is at the heart of his creative process, and plays a role both in the generation and development of musical ideas, as well as in the overall building and presentation of form in his performances. Ultimately improvisation represents a powerful tool in Sammut's creative arsenal, but never takes center stage: emotional and musical communication is what Sammut prioritizes above any particular technique or method. Improvisation is *how* he makes music, but it is the music itself that is his highest priority.

Be aware where you want to go, not how [or] why. We have to push this out of the mind... It's not about myself. It's about music... Which musical direction? And this is a good line to follow to get in trust, and to be a tool for the music—to serve the music... And people paid or just [came] to listen [to] music, to have good time, to share something—a moment with other people. To learn. It's not about you, it's not about me... It's just, music first.⁵⁴

The following chapter will look closely at a number of transcriptions of Sammut's live improvisations, including an improvised version of *Rotation IV* from his LHS Seminar Clinic, an improvised section of *Dance of the Knights* from the PerkuMania Festival in 2013, and two selections from his PASIC 2009 concert: *The Days of Wine and Roses*, and the *Second Mexican Dance*.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 6: Live Examples of Improvisation

The improvisational technique of Éric Sammut has been explored in detail over the course of the preceding chapters. This has included his approach to improvisation from a philosophical point of view, his technique and physical approach to his instrument, exercises and concepts that develop improvisational fluency, and the application of improvisation to his creative process. Along the way many of his published pieces have been analyzed to varying degrees, exposing a consistent balance of intellect and intuition in his creative output, as well as a consistently recognizable style. The present chapter will explore his explicitly intuitive efforts by examining excerpts from four unpublished improvisations, transcribed by the author, that represent a wide spectrum of musical situations. Each transcription will be looked at from a different perspective, demonstrating that all of the concepts revealed previously appear in his live improvisations in addition to his published scores.

The Days of Wine and Roses

The first transcription to be dealt with is Sammut's improvisation on Henry Mancini's *The Days of Wine and Roses*. This was performed as the second piece of Part I of Sammut's Keyboard Showcase Concert at PASIC '09. Sammut played an improvisatory arrangement of the theme, followed by one chorus of improvisation in a swing tempo. The theme is 32 measures long, divided into two 16-measure segments, resulting in an A-A' form. Sammut's interpretation of the A section is shown in the following example. He uses an unmetered linear texture throughout, primarily realized through the use of three-note Left-hand Structures with broken intervals in the right hand, and an occasional assisted melody. Anticipated bass notes are noted with a single slash through the note stem. This example, like that of the *Danny Boy* example in the previous chapter, demonstrates the great melodic and harmonic flexibility of Sammut's unmetered approach. He never locks into any predictable pattern or ostinato. Also, he is able to imply smooth, piano-like voice leading in the left hand part, as can be seen in the analytic sketch below the transcription. Notice the eighth-note bass anticipations at measure one, and especially mm. 15–16, where there is interesting harmonic motion: the bass notes ascend the scale: G, A, Bb, C. The chord

qualities are reminiscent of Bill Evans—the G, A, and Bb are all minor seventh chords, arriving finally at a C7 chord on the second half of measure 16. Sammut uses a 1/7LP for all four of these chords.

Example 6.1¹: *The Days of Wine and Roses*² as played by Éric Sammut

Days of Wine and Roses, Thematic Statement (first half)

$\text{♩} = 78$ *poco rubato*

1/[7,3]LS 1/[3,7]LS 1/7/3LS 1/3/7LS 1/5/9LS

7/[3,5]LS 1/3/7LS 1/[7,9]LS 1/5/[3]LS 1/[5,7]LS 1/[7,3]LS

1/5/8LS 1/[3]LP 1/[7]LP 1/[7]LP 1/[7]LP 1/7LP

Sammut plays the A' section of the theme in a similar manner to the first, maintaining the rubato, unmetered texture until two measures before the top of the form. Recalling Sammut's advice that exclusively rubato arrangements feel incomplete, he generates more interest and contrast in the second half of this performance by transitioning into a steady 4/4 swing tempo for the 'solo' section. The first sixteen measures of this section can be seen next, along with a left-hand reduction and motivic labeling.

¹ Percussive Arts Society, "PASIC 2009 Éric Sammut Keyboard Showcase Concert."

² Henry Mancini and Johnny Mercer, "The Days of Wine and Roses," Warner Bros. Inc., 1962 (Renewed).

Example 6.2: *The Days of Wine and Roses* Solo with Motivic Analysis

Days of Wine and Roses, Solo Section (first half)

$\text{♩} = 142$
in swing tempo

1 *mf* 3 a1 b1 3 a1 1 F Eb7(#11) a1 Am7 D7(b9) 4:3 b2 3

5 Gm7 3 b1 3 Bbm7 Eb7 a1 a3 Am7 Dm7 3

11 Gm7 a1 A7(b9) 3 Dm7 G7 Gm7(b5) C7alt. b2 3

1/7/LP 1/3/LS 1/7/3LS 1/7/LP 1/5/3/12LS 3/7/LP 1/7/3LS 1/7/3LS 1/7/LP 1/7/3LS 1/5LP 1/7/LP 1/7/LP 1/7/[3]LS

The most striking feature of this excerpt, especially when compared to Example 6.1, is the amount of space (silence) in the texture, especially in the left hand part. There are many gaps in the accompaniment due to the more active melodic material, necessitating the assistance of the left hand in the melodic statements. This can be seen as an extension of the three-mallet blues examples from Chapter 4 (see examples 4.11 and 4.12), in that the left hand accompanies more sparingly, shifting the focus to the melodic improvisation. For example, mm. 5–8 feature almost no accompaniment at all.

There is a close correlation between the left hand parts during the Theme and Variation sections, as can be seen next. The use of Left-hand Structures is summarized in the following example, showing the LS's used in the thematic statement in the top line, and the LS's used in the variation on the lower line. Only in mm. 6–8, and the third measure from the end, does Sammut use different bass notes during the variation. Frequently he uses the identical LS, but when not, he usually uses a simpler LP in place of the LS in the variation. Notice too the relative absence of rotation notes and rotation intervals in the

variation, due again to the more active melodic line. This is another example of keeping the left hand “almost the same.”

Example 6.3: Comparison of Left Hand in Theme and Variation

Theme

F Eb7(#11) Am7 D7(b9) Gm7 Eb7

1/[7,3]LS 1/[3,7]LS 1/7/3LS 1/3/7LS 1/5/9LS 7/[3,5]LS 1/3/7LS

Variation

Am7 Dm7 Gm7 A7(b9) Dm7 G7 Gm7 Am7 Bbm7 C7

1/[7,9]LS 1/5/[3]LS 1/[5,7]LS 1/[7,3]LS 1/5/8LS 1/[3]LP 1/[7]LP 1/[7]LP 1/[7]LP 1/7LP

1/7/3LS 1/7/3LS 1/7LP 1/7/3LS 1/5LP 1/7LP 1/7LP 1/7/[3]LS

Melodically, Sammut’s variation can be seen as a development of a simple motive derived from the original theme: a pitch descending by a whole step and then returning. He states this motive, and its inversion, at the outset of the variation, and then proceeds to weave this idea through his melodic statements. The motive is shown in its original (thematic) version below, along with various transformations. See the labeled brackets in Example 6.2 that follow the scheme in Example 6.4 below. Just as motivic unity permeates many of his scores, this same concept plays a role in the structure of his improvisations.

Example 6.4: *The Days of Wine and Roses* Motivic Summary

Motives from Original Theme:

a1 b1

The Days of Wine and Ro - ses

Motivic Variations in Sammut's Variation:

a2 b2 a3

In this way, Sammut’s melodic improvisation on *The Days of Wine and Roses* can be seen as a variation on the motives inherent in the original theme. His approach to melody is not simply based on running scales and arpeggios, and significantly, he does not draw heavily on bebop vocabulary either. Rather, his focus is on developing thematically relevant ideas in real-time while maintaining the structure of the

music through the various marimba-specific tools explored previously. Even when, as here, he is playing a jazz standard, the result is clearly rooted in Sammut's own unique and identifiable musical conception.

Rotation 4³

The next examples of Sammut's improvisation are taken from a performance of his fourth *Rotation*⁴, performed during his clinic at the LHS Seminar in June of 2014. As was noted in the previous chapter, Sammut has the ability to alter the surface of his pieces to any degree while maintaining the structure of the music. This performance highlights this fact in a dramatic way. The following excerpt shows measures 10–18 of the original score lined up with the corresponding measures of his improvisation. Notice that the music is changed considerably: melodic content, rhythm, and even meter are altered. The common thread linking the two versions is the harmony. Throughout the improvised performance, Sammut only rarely deviated from the original harmonies. Two subtle instances are shown below: in measure 12, he substituted an Eb7sus chord for the original Eb Major, and the original Abm/Cb is changed to a root-position Abm7 chord. Also, in measure 14 the left hand part is different, although the governing harmonies remain intact in both versions.

The most significant detail that emerges when these examples are compared side-by-side is the fact that the left hand positions are nearly identical. The sketches below the score simply show the Left-hand Position on each harmony, rather than the whole structure (if present), to make the comparison clear. In mm. 10–11, and mm. 16–18, the left hand is based on the same pitches but is in a higher and lower register, respectively.

³ *Rotation 4* by Éric Sammut: mm. 1–10, 19–20. ©1996 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

⁴ Sammut, "Seminar Clinic."

Example 6.5: Éric Sammut, *Rotation 4*, mm. 10–18: Comparison of Original to Improvisation

Rotation 4 mm. 10-18: Original

10 Fm^7 $D\flat maj^7$ Fm^7 $B\flat m^7$ $E\flat maj^7$ $A\flat m^7/C\flat$

Rotation 4 mm. 10-18: Improvisation

mp $E\flat^7(sus4)$ $A\flat m^7$ *mf*

13 $C\flat^7(\sharp 11)$ $B\flat^7(\sharp 11)$ Fm^7 $D\flat maj^7$ Fm^7 $B\flat^7(b9)$

cresc. *f*

16 Am^7 Em Cm $Gmaj^7$

6:5 3

Even when Sammut expands the range of the *Rotation* down to the lowest notes of the five-octave marimba—a great contrast to the original, which was written for a “low A” marimba only—the pitches he uses to establish the foundation of the harmony remain intact. In the example, the stars in measures 12 and 14 indicate the only times in this excerpt when the left hand sounds different pitches during the improvisation, regardless of register.

The entirety of Sammut’s improvisation on the fourth *Rotation* continued in this manner. Each measure and each harmony of the original were accounted for in the improvisation, with very explicit references to the original in two places: mm. 1–4 and mm. 20–27. Sammut maintained the metered, rhythmic texture throughout, never shifting into a rubato feeling. Amid this continuity, there was one surprise during the middle portion of his performance. Measures 19–20 of the original act as a transition into a new section, as seen here:

Example 6.6: Éric Sammut, *Rotation 4*, mm. 19–20

The musical score for Example 6.6 shows measures 19 and 20 of Éric Sammut's *Rotation 4*. The score is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 19 is marked with a C major 7th chord with a sharp 11th (Cmaj7(#11)) and a piano (p) dynamic. Measure 20 is marked with an E minor 7th chord (Em7) and a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The tempo changes from 'poco rall.' to 'A tempo' at the start of measure 20. The score includes a nested form between measures 19 and 20, essentially prolonging the E minor harmony for eight additional measures.

A C Major sonority is established, shifting into Em7 half way through measure 19, which is continued at the A Tempo at measure 20. During the improvisation, Sammut inserted a nested form at the boundary between measures 19 and 20, essentially prolonging the E minor harmony for eight additional measures, before picking up exactly where he left off, as if nothing had been changed. These eight inserted measures are a short quote of the traditional tune, *Greensleeves*.

Example 6.7: Improvised *Rotation 4*, mm. 19–20, with *Greensleeves* Insertion

The musical score for Example 6.7 consists of two systems. The first system, labeled '19', is in 4/4 time. The treble staff has a Cmaj7 chord, and the bass staff has an Em chord. The music is marked *mp*. The second system, labeled '20', is a 16-measure insertion of 'Greensleeves' in 16/8 time. The treble staff has a Cmaj7 chord, and the bass staff has an Em7 chord. The music is marked *mp*. The score ends with a double bar line and the text 'Returns to Rotation 4'.

While the insertion of *Tenderly* and *Mrs. Robinson* were planned in advance, as discussed in the previous chapter, this *Greensleeves* quote is most certainly a spur-of-the-moment idea. He was only performing this version of the fourth *Rotation* in response to a question about his compositional process—as an example of how flexible his pieces are in his mind—and not as a part of any formal performance. For this reason, the entire improvisation can be understood as a purely spontaneous creation based on his understanding of the underlying structure of the work. The structure, rather than the notes, is his primary concern.

Dance of the Knights

Sammut's performance of his arrangement of *Dance of the Knights* from a performance at PercuFest 2013⁵ will be investigated next. While the previous two transcriptions were stand-alone pieces, the following is an example of a variation within a larger work. Sammut performed his *Dance of the Knights* arrangement essentially as written, with only minor embellishments, until he reached measure 64. At this point, he began to improvise around the written material more freely, still making clear reference to the score. Measures 64–71 form an eight-measure passage that is repeated, with first and second endings in the last two measures. The texture is polyrhythmic, with triplet LS's in the left hand and duple rhythms in the right (see Example 4.16 for mm. 64–67 of the original score). In Sammut's improvisation,

⁵ PercuFest International Percussion Festival, "Éric Sammut (France) performing at PercuFest 2013," YouTube, online video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BADQ-qqlzg> (accessed 1/2/16).

the left hand remains nearly unchanged. The harmonic structure of this passage both in the score and in Sammut's improvisatory version is outlined in the following table:

Table 6.1: Harmonic Structure for *Dance of the Knights* mm. 64–73

Measure:	64	65	66	67	68	69	70 / 72	71 / 73
1 st Ending	Em		Bm/D F#7/C#	Bm	Am7	G#m7	Db7/F	Bb7 B7
2 nd Ending							D/F# B7	Em

At measure 74 of the original score, the music shifts into 12/8, the tempo picks up, and the texture shifts from polyrhythmic to metered linear. This encompasses mm. 74–89, which repeat the harmonic structure in the above table. These measures represent another written out variation on mm. 64–73, making *Dance of the Knights* an example of an arrangement with a built-in variation as part of the overall form.

The second phrase of Sammut's improvisation on this section (corresponding to mm. 82–89 of the score) is shown on the following page with analytic reduction. He does not dramatically depart from the written score during this section of the performance, but plays freely with the rhythm and precise contour of the music.

Example 6.8: *Dance of the Knights* Variation transcription (1)

82 ♩ = 74
Em

85 Bm Am

87 G#m7 D/F# B7 Em

poco rit.

Sammur deviates from the strict 12/8 meter at the end of the phrase. Also, notice the large-scale descending melodic line from scale degree 3 (G) down to scale degree 5 (B) spanning mm. 82–85. This is followed by a quick ascent back up to E in mm. 87–88. The music has two driving forces that propel it toward resolution: the harmony itself, and this large-scale melodic motion.

During his performance at PerkuFest 2013, after the passage in question, Sammur returned to the score to play mm. 90–101 as written. The score is marked at measure 101 as a D.S., returning to repeat mm. 64–73 once more before moving on to the coda. However, Sammur took this repeat as an opportunity to open up the form of the piece and improvise more freely for an extended period before

taking the coda. In this case, he did not simply repeat the harmonic structure of mm. 64–73, but rather improvised both melodically *and* harmonically. This is reminiscent of Examples 4.2, 4.4, and 4.5, which featured Sammut improvising freely within the key of E minor, using pivot notes, arpeggiation, and left-hand structures. Coincidentally, *Dance of the Knights* is also in E minor, making comparisons to the earlier exercises simpler. Sammut is familiar not just with the harmonic structure of this arrangement, but with the key of E minor in general, allowing him the freedom to deviate from the structure itself when he chooses to. The passage begins with a polyrhythmic texture but soon transforms into an unmeasured linear texture as the harmonies begin shifting up and down within the key.

The following series of examples will investigate this freely improvised performance. Although Sammut is not improvising directly on the harmonic structure of his arrangement, the music feels appropriate, and continues in the style, mood, and tonality of the preceding music. He continues the idea established in the previous excerpt of organizing his melodic ideas around a large-scale descent, which could be interpreted as an improvised *cantus firmus* that outlines the essential harmonic tones and is greatly embellished in real time through various decorations, scalar and arpeggiated passages, and rhythmic variation. The first phrase, shown next, features a long descent from B down to E. The scale degrees are labeled in the reduction.

Example 6.9: *Dance of the Knights* Improvisation (1)

1 $\text{♩} = 66$
Em

Am/E

5

U.N.

U.N.

U.N.

1/[5,8]LS

1/5/[6,8]LS

5/[3,12]LS

6 B7

Am7/C

Am7

U.N.

U.N.

U.N.

1/[7,3]LS

3/[1,5]LS

1/[5,9]LS

9 B7

Em

Em

U.N.

U.N.

U.N.

1/[7,3]LS

1/[3,5]LS

1/5LP

Throughout this performance there is a recurring motive—each major melodic note (“blue note” as Sammut might put it) is decorated with an upper neighbor, labeled in the analysis by slurs and the “U.N.” marking. At times, such as measure nine, the upper neighbor itself is decorated with melodic embellishment. Also notice the four-pitch LS in measure 4. Four-note LS’s occur with increasing frequency as the improvisation progresses. The second phrase is shown on the next page.

Example 6.10: *Dance of the Knights* Improvisation (2)

12 Em Am/C D⁷ G/B

5 4 3

U.N. U.N. U.N.

1/5[8,3]LS 3/[1,10]LS 1/5/9LS 3/[1,10]LS

16 C⁷ F^{#m7}

3 3 3

(2)

U.N.

1/7LP 1/7LP

18 B^{7(b9)} Em

2 1

U.N. U.N.

1/5LP 1/[5,8]LS 1/[5,8]LS

Again there is a large-scale descent from B down to E. Despite this similarity, the harmonies differ quite a bit from the first phrase, hinting at the key of G Major in measure 15, and reaching down to a low F# for a ii-V-i in mm. 17–19. Once again the main melodic tones are decorated with an upper neighbor.

Measure 16 features a decorated neighbor tone, and there is a melodic arrival on scale degree 2 (F#) in a lower register in measure 17, which then rises up to the appropriate register one measure later (this ‘registral coupling’ is marked with a dotted slur). The end of this passage includes a pickup into the next phrase with the notes B-C#-D# (5, 6, 7) leading to the arrival of E on the downbeat of the next measure.

The third phrase of Sammut’s improvisation, shown in Example 6.11, is a little more complicated than the first two, although it can still be seen in terms of large-scale melodic motion and decoration. Scale degree 1, after a neighbor tone decoration, jumps up to G (degree 3) and then drops to F# (2). There is then a dramatic arpeggiated flourish on a B7b9 chord in measure 23, followed by a gradual melodic ascent back to the initial E. The gesture is restarted, this time without the interruption: 1-3-2-1-7-6-5 (spanning mm. 25–27). Finally, the melody reaches up to E once more, and continues to G, followed by a descent through F natural (b2) to a satisfying resolution on the tonic note in measure 32, coming to closure on a downward E minor arpeggio. The music has thus far descended twice to tonic, once to the dominant, and once (here) to the tonic in a higher register. Sammut is not done, however. After a brief pause, he picks up the E where he left off and continues to descend through the fourth and final phrase of the improvisation (see Example 6.12).

Example 6.11: *Dance of the Knights* Improvisation (3)

21 Em C B7(b9)

1 3 2

U.N. U.N.

1/[5,8]LS 3/[5,3]LS

24 Em C D7(sus4)

1 3 2 1 7 6 5

U.N. U.N. U.N.

1/[5,8]LS 1/[5,8]LS 1/5/[8,3]LS 1/5/[7,9]LS

28 G B7(sus4) Em G7(sus4)

1 2 3 b2

1/[5,8]LS 1/[5,7]LS 1/5/[8,3]LS 1/[4,7]LS

31 Em/B B7 Em *poco rit.*

1 #7 1

U.N.

5/[1,3]LS 1/[5]LP

The fourth phrase, shown below, is Sammut's transition into the written coda. In order to pull the music forward, he continues the downward descent to scale degree 7 (D), 6 (C), and finally to 5 (B), the melody finally arriving here at the pitch that began the whole improvisation, on a V chord (B7). After the stating of the D in measure 34, there is a long arpeggiated line that rises to a high B and falls back down to the D once again, which is emphasized through the neighbor tone motive. The C in measure 36 is likewise decorated with a dramatic swoop downward to the low range of the marimba, returning and reinstating its prevalence through the upper neighbor gesture, before finally landing on B. A final link into the written coda comes in the form of a simple rising line in the final measure that lingers on the leading tone (D#) before returning to the arrangement proper.

Example 6.12: *Dance of the Knights* Improvisation (4)

The musical score for Example 6.12 is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 34 to 36. Measure 34 begins with a G chord in the piano and a 7 in the marimba. A long arpeggiated line in the piano rises to a high B and falls back down to the D. The marimba part has a 7 in measure 34 and a 6 in measure 36, with a 'U.N.' (Upper Neighbor) label in measure 35. The second system covers measures 37 to 38. Measure 37 begins with a B7 chord in the piano and a 5 in the marimba. The piano part has a 'molto rit.' marking. The marimba part has a 5 in measure 37 and a 'U.N.' label in measure 38. The score includes various musical notations such as arpeggios, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Looking closely at this transcription reveals that, even when Sammut allows himself freedom by deviating from the written harmonic and metric structure, he not only maintains continuity with the surrounding music, but also is able to improvise well-structured, logical music. His approach to

improvisation can be fully appreciated through this example: he uses left hand structures to keep the sound of the harmony in the listener's ear, follows tonal chord progressions within the appropriate key, and generates his melodic ideas through a process of embellishing a simple melodic skeleton with soaring arpeggiated lines and recurring motivic cells. Recall his comment from Chapter 4 that his concern is connecting the main notes: the "blue notes." This is the heart of Sammut's improvisational technique.

Second Mexican Dance⁶

And I will finish with a piece I love a lot, one of my favorite pieces. So, it's a piece of Gordon Stout, called "Second Mexican Dance." But I'm sorry, Gordon—I will improvise all.⁷

The closing piece to Éric Sammut's Keyboard Showcase Concert at PASIC '09 was Gordon Stout's *Second Mexican Dance*. Much to the surprise of the audience, he announced he would improvise this piece, as he smiled at Stout, who was sitting in the audience. He proceeded to play a version of this classic work that had never been heard before. His improvisational strategy involved a mixture of many of the approaches that have been seen in his other improvisations: rhythmic and melodic embellishment of the written score, melodic improvisation within a given harmonic structure, and even, as was mentioned earlier, the insertion of another tune entirely, in the same key, and serving as the climax to this piece and in fact to his entire concert.

The majority of Sammut's improvisational interpretation involved two processes: paraphrase, and variation. For a clear example of Sammut's paraphrasing, see the opening of the original *Second Mexican Dance* in the next example. The example includes a minimal harmonic analysis in the form of chord symbols. Essentially, Stout begins on the tonic chord with the opening gesture, moving to the subdominant (D) and dominant (E) over the course of the first phrase. He then repeats the subdominant to dominant progression, coming to rest with a half cadence on E7 in the final measure.

⁶ *Second Mexican Dance* by Gordon Stout: mm. 1–12, 23–36. ©1977 Studio 4 Productions. Used with permission.

⁷ Percussive Arts Society, "PASIC 2009 Éric Sammut Keyboard Showcase Concert."

Example 6.13: Gordon Stout, *Second Mexican Dance*, mm. 1–12, with Chord Symbols

$\text{♩} = 132-144$

1 A

6 E7(sus4) Dmaj7(#11) 3

9 Dmaj7 D E6 E13 E7

Sammut's paraphrase is a prime example of what he means by focusing on the *structure* and *direction* of the music rather than the notes. Sammut begins the piece by altering the mood and rhythmic flow of the original music in the first three measures. He then shortens this passage by eliminating the repeat and continuing the descent of m. 3 downward to a low E, bypassing mm. 4–6 of the original in favor of a more dramatic statement of the dominant (see measure 5 of Example 6.14).

Example 6.14: Sammut's Paraphrase of *Second Mexican Dance* mm. 1–12⁸

♩ = 112
poco rubato

1 *mp* A

5 *f* E7(sus4) 6 D E13

Sammut then briefly alludes to the subdominant (measure 7, Example 6.14) through a series of parallel sixths and tenths before coming to rest on the dominant. This paraphrasing has involved direct reference to the original score and a shortening of the overall harmonic structure and phrase length, while keeping the overarching plan (the *direction*) of the music intact. Sammut's paraphrase of mm. 13–22 follow a similar plan, shortening the phrase length and quoting mm. 19–21 almost verbatim.

Sammut's technique of keeping the left hand "almost the same" while varying the right becomes the main focus of the next passage of music. Measures 23–35 of the original feature outer voices moving in contrary and parallel motion, resulting in a lyrical melody and a very active bass line, with a decorative inner voice played with the inner two mallets:

Example 6.15: Gordon Stout, *Second Mexican Dance*, mm. 23–26

23 *Rubando* (♩ = 108-112)

mp

Sammut extracts the left hand part, which includes the bass notes and the lower pitch (the D) of the inner voice. Above this Sammut improvises melodically, in a contrametric texture reminiscent of the

⁸ Ibid.

Indifference improvisatory section (see Example 3.19). He literally maintains the original bass line for the entire passage, quoting the original briefly in the first measure of the second system:

Example 6.16: Sammut's Variation on *Second Mexican Dance* mm. 23–35



Sammut then proceeded to paraphrase mm. 36–41. After this, he combined harmonic paraphrase and melodic variation by extracting another left hand part from mm. 42–52 of the original, shortening and simplifying the harmonic motion in this section, and settling on a repetitive bass line under what turned out to be a quotation of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme. He returned here to the contrametric texture once again.

Example 6.17: Sammut's Paraphrase and Variation on *Second Mexican Dance* mm. 42–52⁹

In Stout's original piece, this section ends with a dramatic crescendo and ritardando leading into a recapitulation of the opening 22 measures of music. Sammut, in contrast, ended softly and with a pause

⁹ Ibid.

before suddenly transitioning into his nested arrangement of *Mrs. Robinson*. He used a sticking pattern similar to that of his arrangement of Piazzola's *Libertango* to realize the opening statement of *Mrs. Robinson*, as can be seen in the next example:

Example 6.18: Comparison of Sammut's *Libertango*¹⁰ and *Mrs. Robinson*¹¹

Libertango m. 30 Opening of "Mrs. Robinson"

$\text{♩} = 132$

f

Am

$\text{F}\sharp 7$

$1/[5,3]\text{LS}$ $1/[5,8]\text{LS}$

When Sammut reached the chorus of *Mrs. Robinson*, he continued this metered linear texture, with some metric flexibility, incorporating left-hand structures in his usual manner:

Example 6.19: *Mrs. Robinson* Chorus Quote

A $\text{F}\sharp \text{m}$ A $\text{F}\sharp \text{m}$ D $\text{E}7$

$1/5/3\text{LS}$ $1/10\text{LP}$ $1/5/[3]\text{LS}$ $1/5/8\text{LS}$ $1/[5,8]\text{LS}$ $1/3/7\text{LS}$

At the conclusion of the chorus, Sammut made a sudden transition back to the Second Mexican Dance, with a minimally paraphrased version of mm. 68–73, ending with an exciting downward flourish and sharp accent on a low A that concluded Part V of his Showcase Concert.

¹⁰ *Libertango* by Éric Sammut: m. 30. ©2002 Keyboard Percussion Publications by Marimba Productions Inc. Used with permission.

¹¹ Paul Simon, "Mrs. Robinson," Paul Simon (BMI), 1968, 1970.

Example 6.20: Sammut's *Second Mexican Dance* Ending



This exciting and surprising ending to his performance was appreciated by the audience: he received a long standing ovation before performing his untitled encore.

Final Words

The examples of live improvisation investigated in this chapter have shown how Sammut's techniques, developed over the course of his career through a step-by-step process, come to life on stage. His knowledge of musical structure and his particular method of combining melody, harmony, and rhythm allow him to create spontaneous music in a wide variety of idioms, while maintaining the essence of his style. He is able to improvise on jazz pieces, orchestral works, his own compositions, and the marimba compositions of other composers. He is able to take any music and make it his own—his voice shines through regardless of musical context. Additionally, his improvisations are rooted in the music he is playing—there is always a sense of unity between his improvisations and the surrounding musical material. Improvisation is used as a means of building and expanding musical structures and forms, making his live performances a special and unique experience.

Conclusion

Éric Sammut's contribution to the art of solo marimba performance has been profound. Since his international debut at the LHS Competition in 1995, he has garnered recognition as one of the finest marimba soloists in the world. His approach to making music on the marimba is completely his own, resulting from his own desire, early in his career, to follow his intuition and create something unique. As has been revealed in this document, Sammut has a thoroughly thought-out approach to developing his skills: his exercises and examples build naturally on one another to slowly form the knowledge and reflexes necessary to create spontaneous music. His improvisational ability forms the backbone of his creative process whether he is composing or arranging, and it is also applied in live performance to make each concert unique—even when he plays a piece he has known for a long while, there is a freshness and an element of risk inherent in the performance. He always has a choice as to how the music unfolds.

This document has focused exclusively on Sammut's solo marimba repertoire and performance. One area of further research could be to look more deeply at his chamber and ensemble music. Sammut has gradually gravitated toward writing music for instruments other than, or in addition to, the marimba, and his more recent publications highlight this fact. Also, it has been emphasized many times that Sammut prioritizes the structure of the music over the surface details. Another area of possible continued research would be to work to incorporate structural / theoretical knowledge more regularly into a system of pedagogy, particularly in the area of solo marimba performance. Encouraging improvisation at any level early in one's education can help to develop technique, aural skills, theoretical knowledge, and pave the way to making improvisation a live option for concert marimbists. A first step would be to incorporate some of the exercises from this document, and to develop and build on further exercises that deliberately strengthen the hands, ears, and mind simultaneously. This type of training is prevalent in jazz education, and plays an increasing role in piano pedagogy, but is rarely found in non-jazz mallet percussion studies.

It is important to remember that, regarding solo marimba performance, Sammut does not consider himself a jazz musician. While improvisation is obviously the centerpiece of jazz music, the concept of improvisation extends beyond the boundaries of every individual style, genre, and idiom, intersecting with music from every time period and culture. It is not limited to any particular approach, attitude, sound, or technique, but is simply the incorporation of spontaneity into musical performance. This should be an encouragement to anyone hesitant to begin developing this skill: as William Cahn remarked, the word “improvisation” is weighted down with baggage. If one can shed this conceptual baggage and see improvisation from a fresh perspective, it may be viewed as an opportunity, rather than either a burden, or an insurmountable obstacle.

Sammut’s passion for music shines through in all of his performances. His attitude toward performance, particularly in the moments leading up to walking on stage, highlights his love for music. He described his pre-performance preparation in an interview:

First I just support myself. Just say, you're lucky. You will play the instrument you like, you will play the music you like, you will do the job you like. And this is all support for me. So, it's very positive. And, so this is the first thing. And then I like to do warm-up, just one hour before the concert, just to play some extracts of the pieces I will play. So, just for twenty, twenty-five minutes. And then I stop, and I go, and this is the ceremony of changing the clothes - you know, I take my time, very slow... And during this time, I just prepare myself... I just take time, because every morning, not every but often, I have to get my clothes very fast... But here, for the concert I take my time. Time is good. And then, just take the mallets and play on a pillow or something... And when I feel I'm ready I just check if my breathing is okay, I mean if I'm not stopped. You're breathing like this [deep breaths]. Okay—very calm... I just feel I'm alone, and I'm in peace with myself. I don't think about the event too much. And then, just before to go, then I'm coming back to support myself and say, okay, you're so lucky—you're so lucky! You play the music you like, you have fun—you will do the job you like, you will share music with people. And that's it. Then when I come on stage, I'm so hungry, you know? I want to play for an eternity... When I'm coming on stage, even if I'm completely tired, I'm ready to die on the stage, really.¹

It is Sammut’s sense of *gratitude* that allows him to have such a positive performance experience.

Playing music, and especially playing music on the marimba, is an integral part of his life. His daily warm-up, which always includes improvisation, is his way of saying ‘hello’ to the music every day, even

¹ Seminar Interview

when he is in the midst of a busy period of life. He described his daily routine as “soul breakfast.”² This relates to his analogy, shared in Chapter 2, that for him the marimba is like a “secret garden.” This life-enriching relationship with music does not *require* improvisation, however improvisation is a powerful way of opening the door to this type of experience. Sammut’s musical life and career are a testament to this notion. It is hoped that this document will enable a wider percentage of the percussion community to appreciate, learn from, and be inspired by Éric Sammut’s musicianship, opening up creative possibilities and further avenues of musical satisfaction for the next generation of marimba artists.

² Paris Interviews part 3

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